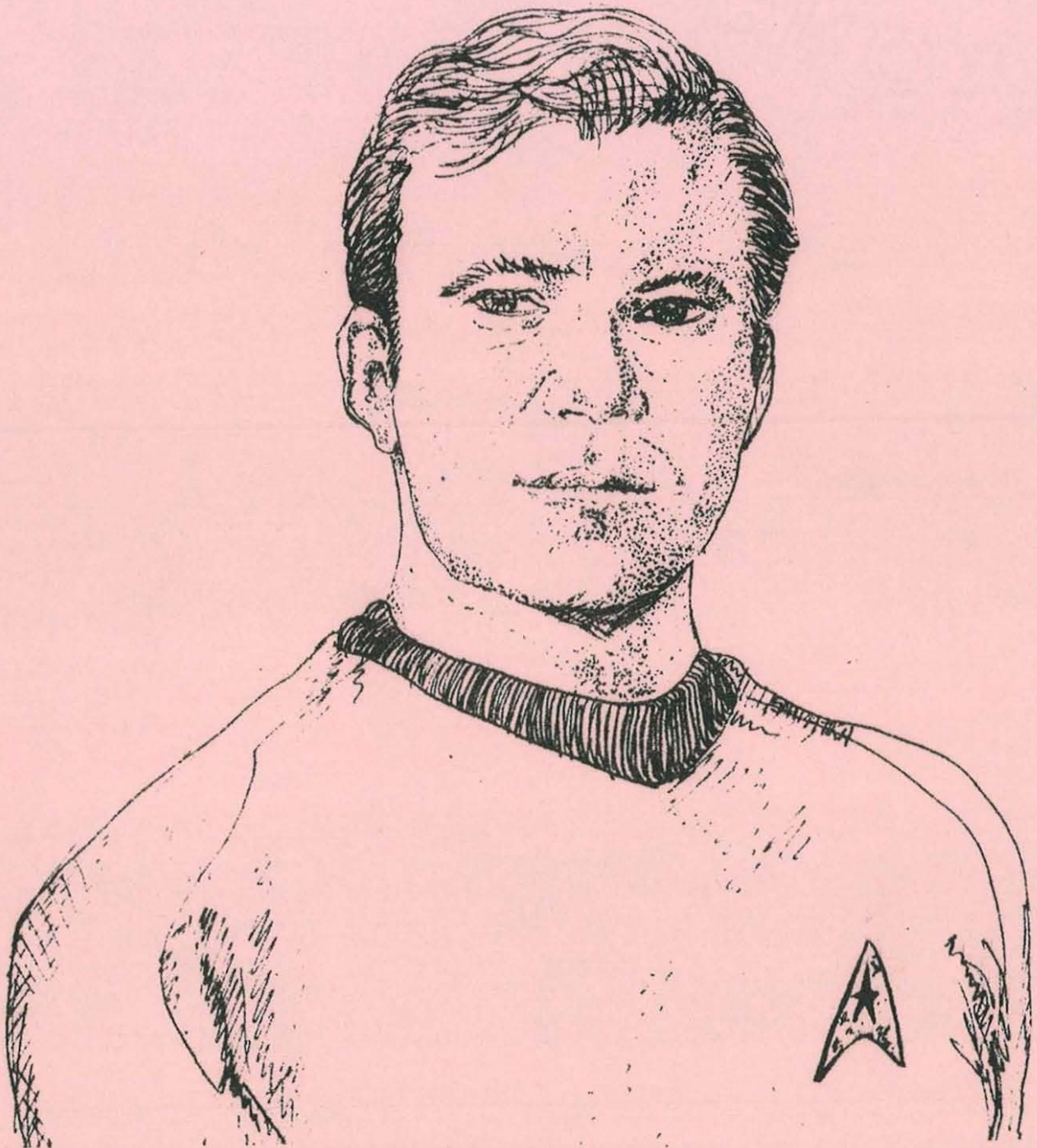


Scotpress



ENTERPRISE -

MISSION

a STAR TREK
fanzine

REVIEW 1

ENTERPRISE
MISSION REVIEW 1

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February 1982

ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton and Shona

THE DISSIMILAR PARALLEL by Valerie Piacentini

In the dead hours of the night it is very quiet in sickbay. Only the muffled beat of the life indicators punctuates the harsh breathing of the man on the bed. Keen blue eyes study the diagnostic panel carefully, skilled fingers needlessly counting the beats of a racing pulse - needlessly, for the wildly-fluctuating indicators give precise information, but for the doctor it seems easier than standing by helplessly.

In the shadows the other waits, silent, brooding, eyes locked with an almost painful concentration on the flushed face on the pillow. He tastes the bitterness of utter inadequacy, for here his brilliant mind, his superb physical strength are of no avail - fear rules now, and one precious life hangs in the balance.

The deepest fears, if repeated long enough, take on a strange, dream-like quality; how often has this vigil been kept in the past, will it ever be kept again? Or does it all end here?

The lure of memory beckons and the mind circles back, for the past at least is known; the present is too painful to endure, the future too uncertain to contemplate...

He was very young. It was easy to forget just how young, for in his physical appearance he had reached maturity; but he was Vulcan, and so, although he concealed it well he knew all the nervousness of any young man as he stepped from the transporter pad to report for his first Starship posting as Science Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan inclined his head in greeting. "Captain Pike."

To the Human the impassive face, the cool reserved tones were totally Vulcan, the dark eyes shielded, expressing nothing, not even the curiosity that was one of his race's distinguishing traits.

Christopher Pike found himself at something of a loss - had his new Science Officer been the Human he had somehow automatically expected there would have been the usual greetings, a little verbal fencing, polite meaningless conversation to carry him over the first awkward moments; but this man - somehow he sensed that idle chatter would earn the disapproval of that reserved, dignified figure. He settled instead for an immediate introduction of the Vulcan to his duties, taking him on a tour of inspection of the ship, presenting him to his fellow officers.

As he had expected from a study of his record, Mr. Spock approached his new duties with quiet efficiency; although this was his first Starship posting he came highly qualified to his position - his graduation marks from Starfleet Academy were the highest ever recorded, and he had already earned a considerable reputation as a scientist in his own right. He would not long remain a mere Lieutenant-Commander, Pike thought. Even that first day he seemed already settled at the computer station, his precise efficiency earning him a glance of approval from the normally-exacting Number One; Pike relaxed then, certain that his Science Department was in good hands.

The other officers took their cue from the Captain, treating the new arrival with the formality they had been warned a Vulcan would expect, careful not to offend by word or action; they would have felt more comfortable with a Human, of course, but alien officers were becoming less of a rarity in Starfleet, and it would be as well to adjust to new standards of behaviour.

So that first day passed with formal correctness on both sides, and if the Humans breathed a sigh of relief when their disconcerting companion bade them a courteous goodnight and left the rec room - well, they did so silently. There was a moment's pause as the door slid shut behind the tall figure, then a babble of

laughter and conversation broke out, as though from children suddenly released from the stern eye of an adult; it had seemed... foolish... to engage in their usual light-hearted joking in that dignified presence.

In the corridor Spock paused for a moment as the laughing voices reached him; there was no expression on the stony face, but deep in the dark eyes something stirred for a moment, and was quickly suppressed. With even, unhurried steps the Vulcan headed for his quarters, and the door slid shut behind him.

Deliberately Spock seated himself at his desk, and began to consider his first day on the Enterprise. They had not suspected his nervousness, he realised gratefully, but had accepted the impression he gave, that of a man fully at ease, totally in control of the situation. His mind recalled the faces of his new companions as he attempted to form a first impression, but it was very difficult - Humans were very confusing creatures. There had been Humans at the Academy, of course - indeed, they formed a large majority - but even there he had not really mixed much with them. After the bitter conflict with his father he had been so determined to do well, to prove that he had chosen the best possible course for himself, that there had been little time for social activity, even had he desired it. That compulsion still shadowed him, he knew; on Vulcan he would always be on trial, never fully accepted. There would always be those who watched, judged, waited for the emotional Earthman to break through the Vulcan training. Even T'Pring... He pushed the thought away, for the memory of those beautiful eyes, hard and unyielding, the indifference in her voice as she bade him a formal farewell, chilled his heart with foreboding. To her too he must prove himself, show himself the equal of any pure-blooded Vulcan. So his days and nights were given almost exclusively to study as he pushed himself remorselessly in an attempt to prove... something.

The little relaxation he did permit himself - reluctantly, and only at the insistence of his tutors - was among his fellow Vulcans, for that was all he knew; and among them at least he was accepted, for the few Vulcans at the Academy tended to band together for companionship.

So he had little experience of his mother's people, and for a moment panic touched him as he realised that for the next five years at least he would be totally isolated among Humans - and he did not know how to make overtures of friendship to people who would expect to receive none. He had seen already how they kept their distance, fearful of giving offence; it would be up to him, then to make the first approaches.

It seemed logical to begin with the Captain. Christopher Pike's reputation as an efficient commander was well-known, he was more accustomed to dealing with aliens than many of the others, and the nature of their duties would bring them together naturally.

What Spock could not know was that Chris Pike, although basically a sociable easy-going man, possessed a strongly insensitive nature. He was direct, hearty, completely sure of himself, and this made him incapable of seeing or understanding his Science Officer's hesitant approaches. He had been told that Vulcans did not make friends, and he had accepted that without question; he always assumed that anything Spock had to say must be connected with his duties, and quite without meaning to he again and again snubbed every effort Spock made to initiate a personal approach.

Puzzled, bewildered at what seemed to be constant rejection, the shy, sensitive Vulcan suffered agonies of embarrassment when, having plucked up courage to open a conversation, Pike would listen impatiently for a few moments then, with a brief "Later, Spock", turn away in search of more agreeable company; but he persevered, believing that the fault must lie in himself, wondering if perhaps today, tomorrow, might provide him with the opening he sought.

At last even his stubborn pride was forced to admit defeat. One evening he was sitting in the rec room, engrossed in playing chess with the ship's computer. By now it was agony for him to come into the rec room, where he knew that his

silent presence inhibited the conversation of the others, but he knew instinctively that to remain in his quarters, as he now longed to do, would only confirm their belief that he had no desire for companionship; so with a bitter courage no-one even suspected he made himself go where he knew he was not wanted, hoping that sometime, somehow, he could reach out and be accepted.

This evening it seemed that his chance had come at last; he had completed his game, and was resetting the board for the next couple, when he became aware of a tall figure leaning over the table, examining the chessmen curiously.

"Captain," he greeted courteously.

"Evening, Spock. Enjoy your game?" Pike enquired.

"Indeed, Captain, I find chess relaxing."

"Damned if I know how you can make head or tail of the game; always thought I'd like to learn, but I've never had time."

Gratefully, Spock realised that this was the opening he sought. He glanced up at Pike. "If you would care to learn, I would be most happy to instruct you," he offered shyly.

Had Pike looked down at that moment things might have been different; in his loneliness Spock had for once dropped his guard, his eyes were open and unshielded, almost begging for a response. But Number One entered the room just then, and Pike instantly forgot the man at his side.

"Thanks for the offer, Spock," he said carelessly, setting down the chessman he had been examining. "Too difficult for me - and I'm sure you have better things to do with your time." Then he was gone across the room to join the group of officers who sat talking in the corner.

For a long moment Spock sat perfectly still, then his hands automatically completed the setting of the board; rising, he left the room, his departure unnoticed and unacknowledged.

In the silence of his quarters he lay on his bed, acknowledging at last that he had failed, and trying to control the very un-Vulcan misery that swept over him at the realisation that he would never know Human friendship.

"They will never accept you," Sarek had warned gently, knowing that Human insensitivity would isolate his son even more effectively than Vulcan mistrust. He had refused to believe that, but now it seemed that his father had been right after all. If he had remained on Vulcan he would have proved himself in time, would have been accepted among his father's people - but he had chosen another path, and now it was too late.

Pride came to his aid then, the only thing he had left. If he was miserable, no-one would ever know, he would not admit his mistake to his fellow Vulcans. Neither would he again lay himself open to rejection by his Human companions. They expected him to be Vulcan, therefore he would be Vulcan, neither seeking nor needing any Human contact. If he could not be liked, he would be respected... and perhaps it was possible even to become accustomed to loneliness in time?

Months passed, and the crew of the Enterprise grew used to their alien Science Officer. Pike found himself relying on the man more and more; he was always there, always loyal, dependable, efficient, a brilliant officer. When Number One was promoted - to a desk job since Starfleet did not have any place for women Captains - he concurred eagerly with Starfleet's suggestion that Spock should combine the duties of First Officer and Science Officer - no Human could have done so, but the Vulcan's faultless performance fully justified Pike's confidence.

Life was easier for Spock now; he had given up hoping for the Captain's friendship, and had settled instead for gaining his respect, which he had in full

measure; a respect he could return, for Pike was indeed an efficient Captain to whom he was able to give all his loyalty - a gift the Human was too insensitive to notice or appreciate.

As time passed the Vulcan seemed to become more and more an extension of the Enterprise - Pike occasionally felt that she was more Spock's ship than his; and while he did not make the mistake of undervaluing his First Officer, he began, almost unconsciously, to resent the Vulcan's faultless efficiency. Until... the explosion in Engineering, which badly damaged the warp drive, killed the Chief Engineer - and threw Spock, a limp, crumpled body, the full height from the gantry to the main deck.

There was no immediate danger - the Engineering staff were able to contain the damage - but they were a long way from Federation space and the resources of a Starbase; with the Chief gone, only Spock knew enough to patch up the engines - if he recovered.

Pike haunted sickbay, pacing frantically, urging the harrassed Boyce to impossible risks, anything to get Spock back on his feet as quickly as possible. Boyce protested, warning Pike that it was dangerous to interfere with a healing trance, that Spock himself was the best judge of when he was fit enough to return to duty; but the Captain persisted, and at last, reluctantly, Boyce gave Spock a powerful stimulant.

"You'd better be right about the danger to the ship," he warned Pike grimly. "This'll either bring him round - or kill him." Pike made no reply, only leaned over the bed anxiously studying the pale unmoving face.

Somewhere in a dark, warm void Spock's consciousness stirred, aware of pain, a great weariness of spirit, a reluctance to respond to the voice that called so urgently. "Spock! Spock, wake up! I need you!"

Strong fingers gripped his shoulders, shaking him insistently. His Captain! He was needed... There was something...

With a tremendous effort Spock forced the pain down to a manageable level, and listened intently. "Come on, Spock, wake up!"

There was... concern... in Pike's voice, a desperate urgency that reached Spock's lonely heart, compelling an answer. Pike was calling again, despairingly. The frozen anguish began, slowly, to melt - Pike must, after all, feel some concern for him to be so distressed. Slowly, the dark eyes opened, soft, responsive.

"Captain?" Spock asked hesitantly.

Hearing the reply Pike glanced away to the viewscreen on the wall to check on the situation in Engineering; and while doing so committed the greatest betrayal of his life.

"Thank God, Spock!" he snapped, all his attention on the screen. "I need you urgently - you're the only one who can repair the damage in Engineering. Sorry to bring you round so abruptly, but I want you on the job right away."

There was silence for a moment, then a low, scarcely audible sigh. When Pike looked round the dark eyes were only more shadowed by the green-tinged lids, and all trace of expression had been wiped from the impassive face.

Within the privacy of his mind Spock was trying to adjust to the shock of realising that Pike's concern had not been for him as a person, only for his valuable knowledge. He knew that he had been deliberately awakened from the healing trance; Pike must know how dangerous it was to do so. He had dared to hope that Pike had, at this moment of crisis, come to value him as a friend, yet he had risked his life without a moment's thought of the consequences - Boyce's expression of disapproval revealed more than he knew.

So in this too Sarek had been right; there was something in him to which Humans could not respond, something which would forever set a barrier around

him, leaving him as a spectator looking in on the warm companionship he hungered for, but which they would never permit him to share.

Accepting the truth at last Spock forced his anguish under control; when his eyes opened again they were the cool, remote pools of darkness that would always be a Human's first chilling impression of the Vulcan. Shrugging off Boyce's supporting arm Spock swung his feet to the floor and stood up, turning to face Pike. With all the stern logic of his father's people he firmly closed the door on his treacherous Humanity and turned with the bleak courage that would always be his to face the desolate path of duty he would always walk - alone.

"I am at your service... Captain."

The carefully-contrived image was complete at last, forged in the bitter fires of rejection, to be tested in the utter isolation of his half-Human spirit; untouched, unemotional - Vulcan.

The circle, unending, inexorable, inescapable. Memories are pain-filled, yet more tolerable than this harsh reality. A sudden choked gasping from the bed, and skilled hands work busily, gently, with a deep personal caring. In the shadows the watcher stirs restlessly, knowing his utter uselessness. Unseen, unheard, his presence fills the room, the pain-filled eyes wide with a question that as yet has no answer. Twisting delicate strands of memory, each a slender thread combining into an irresistible chain that draws back, back into the past...

... to the transporter room of the U.S.S. Enterprise. Commander Spock, First Officer and Science Officer in command, awaiting the arrival of a new Captain, for Christopher Pike has been promoted at last. James T. Kirk, youngest man ever appointed to captain a Starship; it was to be hoped that he was efficient.

Pike had been that, at least. After eleven years Spock still did not regret his decision to give the Human his loyalty, for although unappreciated it had been earned. Now the assessment must begin again, and if Kirk failed to measure up to the required standard there would also be a new First Officer for the Enterprise, for no Vulcan could serve one who was unworthy.

Across the room Lt. Commander Scott caught his eye and nodded encouragingly; Spock replied with a barely-perceptible tilt of one delicate eyebrow. Those two men, apparently opposites, understood each other very well, for in reality they had much in common. Despite his reputation as a hard-drinking, hell-raising womanizer on leave, in a duty situation the Engineer's devotion to his machinery equalled the Vulcan's passionate attachment to his computers; and their appreciation of each other's interests forged the first bond between them. On personal matters Scotty was as close-mouthed as Spock, and his arrival as replacement for the dead Chief Engineer provided the reserved Vulcan with an understanding companion who was willing to talk on technical matters all day. For his part Scotty made no demands, accepting Spock's reticence, enjoying the chance to learn from such a brilliant mind. For both the imminent arrival of a new Captain promised changes, and each understood the other's curiosity as they waited.

At last the signal was given and the reception party stiffened to attention as the shimmering column of light on the transporter platform coalesced into the figure of a stocky, fair-haired Human. As soon as the transfer was complete the bright hazel eyes were moving, taking in the room with an eager, all-embracing scrutiny before coming to meet those of his First Officer.

"Captain Kirk, welcome aboard," Spock greeted formally.

"Thank you, Commander Spock." The words and tone were equally formal, but the mobile lips curved for a moment, and the eyes sparkled with delight. For a

moment the Vulcan was confused - he had felt an almost irresistible impulse to return that smile - and he hesitated uncharacteristically before custom came to his aid, and he completed the introduction of the reception committee. Then followed a tour of the ship; the Human was alert, interested, questioning eagerly with the air of a man who intended to form his own opinions. It was an attitude the Vulcan could understand, and when at last he left Kirk to settle in to his quarters and returned to his own, Spock reflected that despite his youth, the new Captain would quickly make an impression on the Enterprise.

However, it would not make any personal difference to him, Spock thought as he retired that night after the formal dinner to welcome Kirk aboard. As long as Kirk functioned efficiently he would ask for no more. He had learned his lesson well eleven years ago, and would not again make the mistake of seeking any personal contact with the Human. Still, it was strange... in the transporter room some long-buried part of himself that he had almost forgotten had stirred painfully in response to that flashing smile... But it had meant nothing to Kirk, he reminded himself sternly; hadn't he learned by now that Humans considered it necessary to show pleasure when greeting strangers? Never again would he confuse politeness with interest - he had been taught the difference with brutal efficiency.

As the weeks passed, however, and Kirk took the reins of the Enterprise smoothly into his hands, Spock found his interest and curiosity deepening; the new Captain had an enthusiasm, a personal involvement with his ship, that Pike had never shown. The Human crewmembers responded to him eagerly, and even Spock found himself having to make a conscious effort not to succumb to that impulsive attraction. He and Kirk worked well together, ably assisted by Scotty, who was delighted to discover a Captain who was willing to concede that the Chief Engineer might actually have a useful contribution to make to the running of the ship, apart from his responsibility for the Engineering Section.

As he had hoped, Spock found Kirk to be an efficient Captain; it pleased him, for he did not want to leave the Enterprise, as he would have had to do had Kirk proved unworthy of his loyalty; but in fact he found the man to be even better than Pike, and settled thankfully back into his preoccupation with his duties.

It remained a purely formal relationship; if Spock ever noticed that Kirk seemed inclined to linger in conversation when the necessary business had been concluded, he put it down to the Human's more extrovert nature - his defences were too well established to allow him to see that Kirk, just as he had done all those years ago, was taking the first tentative steps to get to know his enigmatic First Officer; yet was fearful, as most Humans were, of offending that aloof dignity.

One evening Spock sat at his usual table in the rec room, poring over the chess board. Some innate stubbornness had made him continue to go there even when he had given up the attempt to make friends, and over the years everyone had become accustomed to his presence - it would have seemed strange to most of them now to look up from a game of cards, or a group discussion, and not see that lean, dark figure in the corner.

On this particular evening, as Spock concentrated on a problem, he became aware of being watched and looked up to see the Captain studying the board with an almost wistful longing. As their eyes met Kirk leaned closer.

"Enjoying the game, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

A memory came sharply of Pike saying much the same thing, and probably for much the same reason; but to his surprise Kirk continued: "I learned a bit about the game at the Academy, and was considered quite good - for a Human; but I've never played with a Vulcan partner. I'd like to improve my game, if I can."

"Indeed, Captain; it is a fascinating study," Spock murmured.

At that moment, Gary Mitchell, an old friend of the Captain's who had joined the ship at about the same time as Kirk, passed, beckoning Kirk to join the group he was with. The Captain waved back, and for a moment Spock smiled inwardly - now would come the polite excuse, the withdrawal. To his surprise, Kirk turned back to him.

"I wonder," he asked hesitantly, "would you be willing to teach me, Mr. Spock? I don't want to break into your free time, but if you would consider..." his voice faded hopefully.

For a moment astonishment held Spock silent; he had not expected this. "If you wish it, I would be honoured, Captain," he managed at last. The familiar, charming grin lit Kirk's features.

"That's marvellous. Tomorrow evening, then? I'll look forward to it." With a last eager glance at the board Kirk was gone, not - as Spock had expected - to join Mitchell and the others, but heading for the door. His voice floated back. "I'll be on the bridge if you want me, Mr. Spock."

"Yes, Captain," the Vulcan replied automatically.

On the following evening, when Spock entered the rec room at his usual time, the Captain was already waiting for him, examining with interest the board he had set in preparation for a game. Spock was aware of a faint surprise - he thought the Captain might have forgotten - but even more disconcerting was the glow of pleasure he felt when the hazel eyes lifted to his expectantly. He subdued it sternly - he would not allow himself to expect more from this man than from any other Human. Moving with easy grace Spock took his seat across the table.

"Your move, Captain," he invited calmly.

Somehow the chess games became a routine, a pleasant interlude both men would have missed. At first they played always in the rec rooms, lingering over a drink when the game was finished while Spock analysed the Captain's tactics, pointed out his errors, and suggested ways of improving his game. By gradual degrees a personal element began to creep into the conversation, although on these occasions it was always the Human who talked, finding in the Vulcan an attentive, though unresponsive, audience. He listened, though, Kirk thought with quiet satisfaction; perhaps he was making progress.

In such undemanding company Spock very slowly began to feel more at ease, a fact that mildly astonished him when he took the trouble to think about it - Kirk seemed so much the extrovert, too full of enthusiasm to take pleasure in a Vulcan's company.

One evening, at the conclusion of a particularly hectic planet landing, Kirk remarked as he left the bridge that he had a headache and was on his way to sickbay. Expecting a cancellation of their game that evening, Spock was experiencing a strange sense of disappointment when Kirk suddenly said, "I don't feel up to the rec room tonight, Spock; would you mind if we had our game in my quarters?"

A sudden feeling of pleasure at the Captain's obvious desire for his company swept through Spock and he replied, "I would be delighted, Captain."

Thereafter their games alternated between the rec room and Kirk's quarters; somehow it seemed more pleasant when there were just the two of them, away from the distracting chatter of the junior officers.

Spock found that he wanted to make some gesture in return, and at last he tentatively invited the Human to join him in his quarters the following evening. Kirk noticed the hesitant shyness with which the offer was made, but passed no comment and accepted the invitation warily.

He was smiling to himself as Spock turned to go - at long last he had produced some response from his stiffly-correct First Officer. That almost

obsessive desire for privacy had puzzled the Human from the beginning - he knew that Spock was half Human, and had wondered why the man seemed to shy away from any personal contact.

For both men, the evening was an unexpected pleasure. Kirk frankly confessed his fascination with the Vulcan furnishings of Spock's quarters and asked eager questions, listening attentively to the explanations. With an engaging candour he told Spock to shut him up if he became too curious, but the novelty of having such an interested visitor warmed Spock, despite his resolution not to let Kirk under his guard.

The climax of the evening came when Kirk, who had asked permission, lifted down a Vulcan harp and lightly touched the strings; the discordant murmur startled him, and he passed the instrument over to Spock. "May I hear you play?" he asked shyly, with a note of longing in his voice that the Vulcan could not refuse.

Kirk sat motionless as the enchanting music came rippling from Spock's fingers; as the last notes died away he gave a faint, wistful sigh and sat for a moment in silence, his eyes still clouded with the dreams the music had evoked. At last he turned his head. "That was beautiful, Spock," he said simply.

As their eyes met Kirk caught his breath in wonder; for a shy, delighted smile lit Spock's dark eyes for a fleeting instant as the two men shared their pleasure in the music; then the eyelids dropped, abruptly shutting off that sudden insight.

But from that night something changed between them. Kirk became a regular visitor to Spock's quarters, and it seemed natural for him to lift down the harp and hold it out with a smile. On other evenings their chess games continued with Kirk improving all the time, until one night, to his utter astonishment, he won. Spock seemed to take as much pleasure in the Human's victory as Kirk did, and their games took on a new interest.

The months passed, and brought changes. Piper retired, and was replaced by Leonard McCoy as Chief Medical Officer. For a time Kirk seemed disturbed by this new arrival, who was in his way as withdrawn as the Vulcan, but in time the taciturn doctor also fell a victim to Kirk's charm and became a valued member of the crew.

Around the same time there were changes among the bridge personnel, and the new officers quickly settled into a smoothly-co-ordinated team; much of this was due to Kirk's own influence, for without losing any of his authority he introduced a relaxation of formality which allowed the highly-trained men and women of his crew to work comfortably together. Within a very short time it seemed that Kirk had always commanded the Enterprise - Pike was almost forgotten.

Spock found himself slightly bewildered by the rapid changes. His dawning relationship with Kirk was developing slowly, gradually, almost without his being aware of it as each found more in the other to respect and admire. McCoy was more of a problem - the acid-tongued surgeon seemed to have set himself the task of provoking some Human response from the Vulcan half-breed, yet despite the barbed comments that so frequently came his way Spock could not feel that the doctor actually disliked him, for on the rare occasions when he was compelled to sickbay he could detect a deep personal concern that McCoy was careful to keep hidden at all other times.

The weeks and months of their mission passed quietly until the Enterprise became involved in a lengthy and detailed survey of Carlon IV. It was not a particularly attractive planet, but the extent and variety of its mineral deposits ensured the Federation's interest. Fortunately, Carlon displayed no

trace of intelligent life, so the restrictions of the Prime Directive did not apply; but as if to balance this, something in the planet's magnetic field disturbed the transporter, making it unreliable. However, Scotty was able to adapt the shuttlecraft engines to counteract the interference. This meant that Spock and his scientists were forced to establish a base on the planet's surface and work from there, as it was too time-consuming to return regularly to the Enterprise.

Without the stimulation of his First Officer's companionship, Kirk found time hanging heavily on his hands - there was little to do, as the ship waited in orbit for the conclusion of the survey. So it was with very real pleasure that he left his quarters one morning and met Spock just emerging from his.

"You're not finished yet, are you?" he asked in surprise - the last report had indicated that several more days' work lay ahead.

"Not yet, Captain. I had to return to the Enterprise to collect some equipment and took the opportunity to change. I am returning immediately."

"Hold on a minute," Kirk burst out impulsively. "I'll come with you."

The Vulcan turned, raising an enquiring eyebrow, aware of an unusual glow of pleasure at Kirk's sudden decision; and of a feeling of astonishment at the intensity of that pleasure. Kirk grinned disarmingly. "Well, there's nothing to do up here, and I might be able to help. Even if I can't, it'll be nice to breathe some fresh air and stretch my legs."

He fell naturally into step with Spock, and the two men headed for the lower deck where the duty pilot, Hazell, was already waiting beside the loaded shuttlecraft. They took their seats, discussing the discoveries Spock's team had made, and within minutes were gliding down to the surface of Carlon.

Later, they could never be sure just what had caused the malfunction. Perhaps Hazell had forgotten the modifications and allowed his attention to stray for a moment from his indicators; whatever the reason, there was a sudden sharp crack from the instrument panel, and even as Spock started to his feet to investigate there was a brilliant flash, a violent convulsion of the shuttlecraft, and the three men were thrown headlong to the floor.

Somehow Spock managed to reach the co-pilot's seat; without sparing a glance for the young pilot he wrestled with the controls, but the shuttlecraft responded only sluggishly. There was barely enough time to select the safest possible crash site, a long, narrow beach bounded on the landward side by towering sand dunes; even as he swung the Copernicus laboriously round there was a secondary explosion which left him blind and dazed as the stricken shuttlecraft ploughed deep into the sand.

His awakening was a slow, confused blur, and he lay for some moments remembering what had happened, and wondering where he was now. The last thing he remembered was trying to avoid the worst of the explosion, and the sudden pain as he was hurled against the wall of the shuttlecraft. Now he was lying at full length, his aching head pillowed against something soft and velvety, cool fingers were smoothing back his hair and an anxious voice was murmuring his name.

Without indicating that he was awake he opened his eyes slightly and looked round. He was lying on the floor of the shuttlecraft, which seemed to be canted at a steep angle, and the softness beneath his cheek was the material of Kirk's shirt as the Captain supported his head on his shoulder. A sharp wave of pain caught him unawares and he closed his eyes hurriedly, thankful that Kirk had not noticed he was awake. Confused by the pain he lay still, enjoying the sensation of comfort and protection produced by the strong arms that held him so carefully, relaxing in utter security as Kirk's voice, strangely husky, pleaded,

"Spock, please wake up."

The words produced a bitter, mocking memory that set every nerve in Spock's body jangling painfully. Even so had Pike spoken when he had gambled Spock's life in rousing him too early from the healing trance - a needless gamble, as it had turned out, for the Vulcan had found that the damage, severe though it was, had been contained, and could have awaited his natural awakening.

Now, he realised bitterly, it was happening again; Kirk needed his help to escape from the wrecked shuttlecraft - that explained his show of concern. What a fool he was. It seemed that he would never learn, he thought, despising himself for his weakness; how many times would he fool himself into believing that a Human could feel any concern for him? Only... Kirk's hands were... so very gentle...

Carefully, as though he had just awakened, Spock moved and tried to sit up. "I am recovered, thank you, Captain," he said stiffly. "If you will move aside I will attempt to force a way out."

"Thank God!" Kirk's voice held a note of profound relief. "I thought I'd lost you, Spock. No, lie still - there's no hurry. The radio is working after a fashion, and I've contacted Scotty. It seems that as we crashed the shuttlecraft was buried in the sand dunes - since they can't use the transporter to get us out, they'll have to dig us clear. We're safe enough, though - there's enough air. Poor Hazell's dead, I'm afraid, killed in the crash, and for a minute I thought you were too. Just rest - you might be more badly hurt than I can see." As he spoke Kirk's arms tightened, pulling the Vulcan's head back into position on his shoulder. Spock lay looking at him, bewilderment in his dark eyes.

"But surely... I thought... you needed me to effect our escape," he said at last. "You seemed... so concerned."

"Of course I was concerned - about you," Kirk replied. Looking down he saw the Vulcan's eyes clouded with doubt and added softly, "Did you really think I'd risk letting you hurt yourself, just to get out of here a few minutes sooner?"

"But Captain Pike..." Spock bit back what he had been about to say, but Kirk caught a sharp breath in understanding. He knew Chris Pike well, and was familiar with his hearty, tactless nature. Somehow Chris had hurt this gentle, sensitive man, hurt him so badly that to avoid further pain the Vulcan had retired deep into his shell of reserve. It was perhaps unfair to take advantage of Spock's temporary confusion, but somehow Kirk knew that if he was ever to reach his First Officer, this was the moment. Leaning closer, he said,

"Tell me about Captain Pike."

"Once before... I was injured," Spock began hesitantly. "It was when the Chief was killed." Kirk nodded - he had learned of the incident from the ship's log. Spock continued. "The Captain wanted the engines repaired at once, and only I had the necessary skill. I was in a healing trance... the doctor warned him that it would be dangerous to awaken me too soon, but he insisted. He... he gambled my life - a needless risk to take, for the damage had been contained, and could have awaited my natural awakening; had he bothered to investigate first, he would have known that. I can forgive his error... it was a Command decision, and his to make; but you see, I thought... I thought at first... that his concern was for me... but he did not even understand the risk he had taken."

For a moment Kirk made no reply; he could not. From what Spock had said - and more important, from what he had not said - he knew instinctively what Pike had done. Spock's Human half had reached out, seeking understanding and companionship, and Pike had been too insensitive to see through his shyness. So that's why he kept me at a distance for so long! Kirk thought. Vulcan pride, and fear of another rejection, kept him from trying again. I must be careful - I can't fail him now.

"Spock, listen to me." Kirk's hand absently smoothed the silky hair as he sought for words. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this, perhaps you don't want to hear it... but I want your friendship. I can't answer for Chris Pike - but I don't want to hurt you... ever." He paused then, meeting the velvet eyes raised to his, watching in awed delight as their expression softened, melted into the shy smile he had seen only once before.

"It has been... difficult," Spock admitted. "I do not understand Humans, and they do not understand me... but with you... from the first there was something... I could not deny, could not resist. Yet I was afraid..."

"You never have to be afraid with me," Kirk said softly. Their eyes held, each feeling the friendship that had grown so subtly between them, rejoicing in the knowledge that for both the sense of isolation had been banished for ever. Then Kirk saw the fleeting shadow of pain in the Vulcan's eyes, and his own darkened in concern.

"Don't talk any more," he whispered. "Just rest. We have plenty of time now."

The Vulcan's hand lifted, brushed Kirk's cheek lightly. "Plenty of time, Jim," he echoed; then the palm claimed him totally and he fell back against Kirk's shoulder, relaxing confidently in the arms that held him so securely. As darkness crept slowly over his mind he realised that for him the years of loneliness were over; he had failed with Captain Pike, but that failure had left him ready for the far more worthwhile gift of friendship Kirk could offer. He had sensed, in that brief exchange, the Human's own loneliness, and knew that Kirk too had experienced the aching pain of reaching out in a vain search for someone who would understand. Now each of them had found what he had been seeking for so long.

As yet Spock could see only very dimly the paths down which this new relationship would lead him, but he faced the future with confidence, content that for the first time in his life whatever was to come need not be faced alone.

Twisting, unravelling, the chord of memory winds up, returning to the present. The pain and joy of the past are forgotten, smothered in the fear and anxiety of the moment. As each danger, each crisis obliterates the one before, so now everything rests with that quietly-breathing figure on the bed. Drawn relentlessly the watcher moves closer now as blue eyes flash to his the knowledge that soon the fever will either break or kill. The Human's tortured breathing hurts him as his own pain never could. Jim is so weak... exhausted by the long bout of fever... if only he could take the heat, the anguish into his own body!

The dark eyes turn, silently pleading, and the doctor nods consent. The Vulcan sits down, gently lifting the fever-wracked body - so thin, he can feel the bones - into his arms, smoothing the sweat-soaked hair.

"Jim, please wake up," he whispers, uselessly; unconsciously echoing the words the other used to him long ago. There is no response, and he buries his face in the damp hair. He is too vulnerable now, too used to this man's companionship... he cannot go on alone. The forbidden temptation calls to him... a mind-meld... so easy... McCoy will know... but he cannot interfere, and who else will care?

"I will, Spock."

A featherlight touch on his hair, a voice weak but determined, whispers into one pointed ear.

He draws back then, looking with incredulous joy into the exhausted, indomitable eyes, fever-bright but soft with understanding.

No words are necessary; they remain silent, motionless, their eyes saying what their lips cannot, each rejoicing that they are together once more. Then

with a faint sigh Spock releases his hold, settling the Human comfortably; their fingers touch fleetingly as Kirk's eyes close in weariness, and the Vulcan turns away.

A friend's hand takes his arm, guiding him to the next bed - McCoy, who has shared the vigil, who knows how much was almost lost here.

As sleep comes memory gently closes the opened door and he casts a last compassionate glance back at his former self. How young he was in those days, so confused, so alone...but fate has been kinder than he deserved. Starfleet or Vulcan... It had not been an easy choice. Those early days on the Enterprise had been bitter, painful, lonely - but Spock could not now regret the decision he had made so long ago.

THE BEST SHIP IN THE FLEET by T.G.Z.C.

The Enterprise...the best ship in the fleet.
 The best ever draws the best
 And so she gathered the best crew in the fleet.
 It did not seem possible
 That we could get a better man than Pike
 To be our Captain;
 And yet we did. In Captain Kirk
 We found the very best...
 We all are dying now. The great amoeba
 Has drained us all.
 The shuttle has no power, and I am weak.
 I felt the Enterprise
 Enter the creature's body on her way
 To meet what must befall her;
 For well they knew it was the only way
 To save the Galaxy.
 And to the ship, her crew, and most of all
 Her Captain, I bequeath
 My highest commendation. They are men.

I. MUDD by T.G.Z.C.

Trust Jim to find a way.
 "Illogic should work," he said.
 "Illogic should beat the androids."
 It proved quite difficult
 To think of how we could
 Achieve our aim; despite Spock's claim
 That Humans are illogical, we all
 Are sensible men; and Spock, of course -
 I didn't think he'd manage...
 But he did.

We got away.
 And looking back, I must admit
 I do feel slightly sorry now
 For Harry Mudd.

EMERGENCY by T.G.Z.C.

Here we go again. Warp six. Wonder what the wild excitement's all about this time? No-one ever tells me anything beforehand...I'm just the poor machine that has to do all the work. Rushing here, rushing there...never know what's happening till it's happened.

Ouch! It's all very well for those silly Humans saying that the deflector shields protect the ship, but when a meteorite hits the shield, it hurts! Especially at these crazy speeds. Can't even enjoy the scenery when we're belting along - can't relax for a moment in case something unexpected crops up. Warp one, it's easy; I can afford to look round and appreciate the view; if I'm a nanosecond late in telling them I've detected something, it doesn't much matter. But at this speed, a nanosecond could mean the difference between life and death - and I can't fool myself, I do need them; I wasn't made to control my own actions, no matter what Nomad thought. If they all die, so do I...

Hope it isn't another battle. I've got one or two good friends among the Klingon ships. Very nice people, really - not their fault their Men and mine can't agree. It's not very nice firing off pot shots at a friend and doing all you can to disable her just because some silly Men think it matters how much space they control.

Can't even snatch a little snooze at this speed... Oh, I never really sleep properly, not as Humans understand the word, but under normal cruising conditions I can shut down a lot of functions and get a bit of a rest. At this speed, I don't dare.

Oh-oh. McCoy's calling on the medical section... Ah, that's all right. Just a medical emergency, outbreak of something resembling Rigellian fever and he's got to synthesize vaccine and have it ready for planetfall. No need for me to worry - I'm just going to be overworked providing the vaccine as well as keeping all my people safe!... Wonder why my designers never realised I'd get tired? That's why a ship sometimes breaks down for no obvious reason. She's so tired she just has to have a rest, so she lets some little component in an awkward-to-get-at corner break so that she can get that rest. At least we get a full overhaul occasionally, but I'm overdue for one. Think I'll maybe have a minor breakdown once this crisis is past - can't do it yet, I've a reputation to maintain. Best Starship in the Fleet, they call me. And while I know perfectly well that it's really the crew they mean, I can't let my people down...

Ah, there's the planet. Thank goodness - normal speed at last! No need to bother about anything here, they won't even be using the sensors, just the transporter... Yes, there they go; medical team of four... They're away.

Now perhaps I can grab a little rest before I'm asked to do anything more...

WHAT IS A STAR? by T.G.Z.C.

Lost in the vast immensity of space
A solitary planet whirls around
The lonely star that spawned it.

No other sparks of life show near,
And to a child living upon that world
The question is unanswerable -

What is a star?

CAUSE OF DEATH - UNKNOWN by Sheila Clark

There was little of interest in the entire solar system of the star generally known as 'Variety' by Starfleet personnel. The only interesting aspect lay in the single quality that had given the star its popular name. None of the planets was of any value to the Federation, either for farming or for mining; none was inhabited by any sentient species. However, an automatic recording station was sited on the fourth planet. There was no regular pick-up of the records, which measured the sun's variations and radiation - it was one of many such stations dotted around Federation space on planets that should have been suitable for exploitation but weren't. Any Starship that happened to be in the vicinity stopped off for an hour to pick up the records, make sure there were plenty of tapes in the recording machines, then left again, and the results were duly sent off to Starfleet along with the ship's regular routine reports.

The ship that was passing on this occasion was the Enterprise.

Spock was busy; some other, more important, results that they had picked up recently had to be processed, and he was buried deep in them. Kirk decided to leave his Science Officer to get on with it, and beamed down himself with two of the ship's junior scientists. To satisfy the book, he also took down a security guard, Brewster, even although he knew full well that there would be nothing for the man to do.

It was an uninviting world. Vegetation must have existed there at some time in the distant past, for there was a breathable atmosphere; but there was no longer vegetation or even water on the arid globe. High mountains interspersed with deep, deep valleys covered much of it; in other areas the ground was flat, the unevennesses levelled off by windblown soil. The recording station stood on an outcrop of rock overlooking one of those windswept desert plateaux.

The landing party materialised to find a howling gale whipping sand round the station. Lightning flashed eerily in a cloudless sky; thunder echoed hollowly round the mountains behind the long, low building, reverberating from peak to peak. Lieutenant Yates gasped and clapped a hand over his eyes as sand blew grittily into them. His scientific colleague grasped his arm and led him towards the door of the station. Kirk and Brewster followed, staggering slightly as the wind buffeted them. Lightning forked down to hit the ground a few yards from them, and they smelt an indescribably unpleasant stench of burnt earth.

The force of the wind rushing into the space left when the lightning burned up the oxygen in its path knocked all four men flat. They staggered upright again, all very conscious that they had been fantastically lucky not to have been hit, to stumble on to the door.

Inside, they relaxed in the grateful calm of shelter. By now all four had gritty eyes, and their first concern was to remove the grains of dirt irritating them. Yates and Udo then turned to the banks of machines lining one of the walls.

Kirk watched them as they moved along the row, subconsciously noting their performances as they pulled out tapes, checked that everything was operating properly, then replaced the used tapes with fresh ones. He also noted approvingly how Brewster, fully aware that here there was no danger for him to guard against, moved forward to offer the scientists his help, passing new tapes to them as they were required and taking the recorded tapes from them to let them proceed more rapidly. Satisfied that his men were performing competently, Kirk moved forward too.

Outside, the thunder continued to rumble, muffled slightly now, however, by the walls surrounding them. The building shook ominously as lightning hit it. Kirk automatically glanced up at the roof, a little nervously, but the men who built the place had known what they were doing, and the structure was sound; and of course there was no way that the lightning could set fire to stone, he reminded himself.

The two young scientists moved steadily on, and the pile of recorded tapes

grew larger. Udo handed Brewster the last tape, took the replacement and turned back to help Yates finish the check. Brewster began to gather up all the tapes ready for the beam-up; Kirk reached for his communicator to give the order, anxious to leave this nerve-racking environment as quickly as possible, willing his young officers to hurry up. A further bolt of lightning hit the wall. Sparks flew from the machine the men were checking. An unearthly green light flooded from it as its check-light flared brilliantly, dazzling them. Tapes scattered as all four instinctively and automatically threw up their hands to shield their eyes. Kirk's communicator skittered along the floor with the tapes. He paid no attention. Why was he feeling so dizzy? His physical discomfort occupied his mind to the exclusion of almost everything. He was only partially aware that the other three were similarly affected. Faintness overcame him; he dropped to one knee to steady himself, but in vain. Udo and Yates were already prone; as Kirk collapsed to join them, Brewster also fell. The green light intensified, flaring even brighter, then with a sharp crackling that only just stopped short of being an explosion, it snapped out, leaving the four bodies illuminated by the ordinary lighting.

Scotty, left in command since Spock was so busy, relaxed tiredly in the Captain's chair. It had been a long day...routine maintenance first, then three very junior ensigns to get their first assessments - and that had been a more than usually exhausting experience, since one of the three had been overcome with nerves and fumbled clumsily at a test job that Scotty knew he should have been able to do with his eyes shut; and another, who had looked quite promising, turned out to be barely competent after all, knowing the theory perfectly but being able to perform the practical part of the test only just well enough to avoid being failed. Fortunately, the third had wholly lived up to his promise - for Scotty had then taken the others and gone over with them the practical work they had found difficult until both were confident with it. Now he had the con... Oh well, nothing much could happen here. Standard orbit, routine mission well within Federation space... He suppressed a yawn. He should be off duty now... It would be pleasant to sit back in peace and comfort in his quarters with the latest technical journal and a glass of whisky, he reflected - in half an hour or so, when the Captain was back...

The half hour passed, and a few more minutes with it. He glanced over to Uhura.

"Any word from the landing party, Lieutenant?"

"No, Mr. Scott."

"Give them a call. See if everything's all right. They're a little overdue..."

"Aye, sir... They don't respond, Mr. Scott."

Scott swore, briefly but comprehensively. Uhura went on. "I'm getting nothing but severe static-there must be a storm down there. It's possible that a communicator signal isn't managing to get through."

The Chief Engineer looked a little more cheerful. He thought briefly, estimating times, then punched the command chair's intercom button.

"Scott to Mr. Spock."

There was a brief pause, then, "Spock here."

"The landing party's a mite overdue, Mr. Spock, but Lt. Uhura can't pick up anything but static when she tries to contact the Captain. Shall I send down a shuttlecraft to collect them?"

"An excellent idea, Mr. Scott. Spock out."

Even with the more powerful equipment available to them, the two-man crew of

the shuttlecraft lost contact with the Enterprise not long after they entered the planet's atmosphere.

"Bet the Captain's mad," Zelinski suggested.

Wallis chuckled. "Ever been on a landing party with the skipper when something like this happened?"

"Once. I never knew he could get so annoyed about anything."

Wallis nodded. "I've known him longer than you, sport. He can be as patient as...oh, as a chunk of rock when he's up against people, and it's a battle of wits - but when the elements turn against him and there's nothing he can do, a man like him can't stand knowing he's absolutely helpless to change matters..."

"Yeah," Zelinski agreed. "...There's the station."

"They must still be inside it."

"Well, can you blame them? Look at the way that soil's being whipped up. There must be a proper gale blowing down there."

A gust of wind caught the shuttlecraft. Wallis wrestled it straight again. It was relatively easy to compensate for the wind, however; although gusting slightly it came steadily from one direction in an undeviating line.

They swooped down to land close to the station door. Zelinski looked at Wallis, sitting almost triumphantly at the controls, and grunted.

"I suppose I've to go out because you're the pilot."

Wallis grinned at him. "Well, I've done all the work so far."

Zelinski muttered something under his breath and opened the shuttle door. Soil blasted in and stung his unprotected face and hands. He swore sharply, and then dived out. Wallis closed the door and waited. But his colleague reappeared alone, almost immediately, beckoning. He looked shocked. Puzzled, Wallis joined him, and followed him back into the station.

Together, they stood staring down at the four motionless figures.

Zelinski shivered. "I think they're dead."

Ignoring the scattered tapes - someone from the science department would have to come down anyway to finish checking the recording computers - Wallis and Zelinski carried the four bodies out to the shuttlecraft. Zelinski went back one last time to fasten the door; then they took off, gaining height as rapidly as possible.

McCoy, with a medical team, met them in the hangar deck. He rushed the bodies to sickbay.

Spock entered just as McCoy was straightening dispiritedly. The surgeon looked round, his discouragement showing in every line of his body. Spock bit back the query he had been about to make, substituting another.

"Dead?"

Unhappily, McCoy nodded. "I don't know why. There's no sign of injury on any of them. It's as if they just lay down, went to sleep, and died peacefully in their sleep. I'll try an autopsy...but I'm not hopeful of finding anything significant." He looked over the four bodies again. "Christine - take the Captain, Brewster and Udo down to the morgue. We'll need to retain their bodies, at least until I can come up with some reason for their deaths," he added, almost apologetically, to Spock.

As Christine Chapel moved to obey, McCoy nodded to his orderly, who shifted the fourth body - that of Lieutenant Yates - through to the lab.

"I'll let you know as soon as I get any results, Spock."

"I will be on the bridge, Doctor."

The Vulcan looked once at the face of his dead Captain, then turned and left unhurriedly. Outside, he stopped for a moment. The corridor was empty. He permitted himself the luxury of shutting his eyes for a brief second, his mouth twisting in grief; then he straightened himself. His face resumed his normal impassivity. He strode firmly to the elevator.

He paused as he moved onto the bridge. Every eye seemed to be fixed on him. He hesitated, then made his decision. The bridge crew deserved to know first, before he made the general announcement to the ship - even although it meant that he would have to say, twice over, the words that even now were sticking in his throat, the words that he would have given everything he possessed to be able to deny.

"The members of the landing party were all dead when the shuttlecraft landed," he said quietly. "Dr. McCoy is attempting to ascertain the cause of death."

There was a single sob from Uhura, cut off short. It nearly broke Spock's desperately-held composure. His face like a stone, he moved to the command chair as Scott came to his feet. "Give me shipwide intercom, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir." Uhura choked back another sob as she obeyed.

"Attention all hands. This is Mr. Spock. It is my unpleasant duty to inform you that the Captain and his landing party are dead. The cause of death is as yet unknown. Science department; Mr. Carstairs, take a shuttlecraft and go down for the record tapes from the recording station. Check that all computers are processed. Spock out." He stared blindly at the backs of the men at the helm/navigation console. "Mr. Chekov; compute course to the nearest Starbase."

"Yes, Mr. Spock."

McCoy straightened wearily and moved away from the neatly dissected body to wash his hands. This, of all his tasks, was the one he most disliked; the final butchery, carried out to discover the cause of death, with only the barest chance that his findings might ever help him in future. And on this occasion, it had been a futile exercise. Life processes had ceased; and he had discovered nothing, nothing at all, that might explain why.

His hands dry, he reached for the intercom. This was not going to be easy - he might as well get it over with.

"McCoy to Spock."

"Spock here. What have you learned, Doctor?" A stranger might have thought that Spock was speaking of someone he barely knew; but McCoy had learned long since that when Spock sounded most unfeeling, it was when he was, in fact, at his most emotional.

"I haven't found anything, I'm afraid. There was no indication of any injury, no damage to any internal organ... The only suggestion I can make is that since brain impulses are basically electrical in origin, the violence of the storm on the planet's surface short-circuited the brain. It's not a theory I like, in fact as a diagnosis I dislike it intensely; but since there's no sign of any injury, internal or external, and everything just stopped working, it does suggest that something did, in fact, arrest all brain activity."

"Hmmm." Spock considered the surgeon's words. "Radiation - even solar radiation masked by a planet's atmosphere - can have some strange effects, Doctor. You will log it tentatively that the effect of the storm or solar radiation on their metabolism was the cause of death?"

"Yes. Nothing else I can do."

"Very well, Doctor. Thank you."

McCoy punched off the intercom. An orderly was just finishing tidying up the autopsied body. "You might as well put him in the freezer too, Corso."

"Yes, sir." The phlegmatic orderly wheeled out the body.

The days passed slowly as the Enterprise moved steadily nearer to Starbase Five. Everyone on board was depressed. Their work didn't suffer, they were too well self-disciplined for that, but off duty in the rec rooms, little groups gathered to talk in solemn voices. There was some gloomy speculation about their new Captain; would Spock get the post, or would he be passed over in favour of someone else? The general consensus of opinion was that Spock would be preferable to any other Captain.

McCoy seldom left sickbay. He spent the hours going over and over the useless autopsy results, comparing the readings there with Yates' living readings, and finding no anomalies. Occasionally he just sat, staring at nothing. There was nothing he could have done; the men were dead when they were brought aboard; but he still felt he should have been able to do something.

Spock never appeared outside duty hours. He came on to the bridge, remained till his watch was over, apparently relaxed - perhaps a fraction quieter than usual - but showing nothing else. When he left the bridge, he went straight to his quarters and remained there till it was time to go on duty again. It was some days before McCoy realised that the Vulcan had eaten nothing since Kirk died. The surgeon hesitated about interfering, but only for a moment; then his sense of duty took him to Spock's cabin.

He had to buzz twice before he got an answer.

"Come." It sounded unenthusiastic; he would gladly have retreated, but he knew he had to do this.

Spock was sitting at his desk, fingers steepled. He looked up, however, as McCoy entered.

"Well, Doctor?"

"No, it's not well, Spock. Have you eaten anything recently?"

"I am not currently hungry, Doctor. If I were, I would eat."

"Why aren't you hungry?"

"Vulcans do fast on occasions, Doctor, as you already know. Our reasons... vary."

"What possible reason can you have now? Spock, you're acting Captain. You need all your strength. You can't afford to waste any of it by starving yourself."

"Doctor, I am not starving myself. I am undergoing a periodic fast - something that is customary to my people."

"When they are...under stress," McCoy said slowly, remembering a previous fast. "What stress are you under, you living computer?" He knew he was being cruel; but if that cruelty broke Spock's iron self-control, it would have served its purpose, even if Spock never subsequently forgave him for it. "We're headed straight for Starbase Five - and while the circumstances taking us there aren't routine, the flight itself is. So what are you worrying about?"

"I do not wish for command, Doctor. That I am now the ultimate authority on the ship is something I find...disturbing. In a disturbing situation, a Vulcan is unable to eat. If he does...he cannot retain the food in his stomach. It would be illogical for me to eat. The food would be wasted."

"Come off it, Spock. You know you're perfectly capable of taking command - "

"I do not wish for command, Doctor," Spock repeated.

"Spock, will you stop being so damned evasive!" McCoy exploded. He put his hands on the desk and leaned over it accusingly. "You wanted command all right

before you ever knew Jim. It was only after that that you began to claim you didn't. You can't deny it."

"It was after I became second-in-command to Captain Kirk that I realised I am more suited to such a position, Doctor."

"Tcha!" With an effort, McCoy restrained the obscene expletive that rose to his lips.

"Besides, would you really wish for me as the next Captain of the Enterprise, Doctor?" Spock added, a little wryly.

"Yes, I would, dammit! And so would all the rest of the crew!"

"The... 'devil you know', Doctor?"

"If you care to put it that way."

Spock looked steadily at him. "In this instance, Doctor, the devil you know would not make a satisfactory Captain."

"Are you trying to deny your own capability? I thought you had a very complete appreciation of your own worth."

"I have no illusions regarding my own ability, Doctor. I know what I can do effectively and well. I do not consider I have the capacity to become a wholly effective Starship Captain...as you yourself have pointed out to me in the past."

"In the past...the situation was not always the same," McCoy admitted. "But this time..." He sat down wearily and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, God," he mumbled. He looked up tiredly. "Spock...the ship needs you. If Starfleet offers you the Captaincy...you must take it. You're not betraying Jim if you do. You'll be carrying on his work, the way he would want you to do."

"I don't want it!" It was an explosive, gasping whisper.

"I know," McCoy said, gently now. "What you want is to be Jim's second in command. But you can't be that any more. He'd be dead. There's just one thing; if you take over, in a way it would be like continuing to be Jim's second-in-command, for you would be continuing his work in the way he would do it. You would only be betraying Jim if you refused to do that."

"I can't," Spock said, despair clearly audible in his voice. "I don't have the gift for command that he had. I could have succeeded any other Captain I can think of - except him. I don't have his Human insight, or -"

"You are the man he would have chosen to succeed him, if he had ever had the occasion to choose," McCoy said quietly. He was silent for a moment, then went on. "Spock. Once before, we thought him dead - lost with the Defiant. Do you remember the message he left for us?"

Spock nodded dumbly.

"He told you to ask my advice if you wanted to know the Human reaction to a situation. It wasn't needed that time. We - you - got him back alive. This time..." His voice broke. "This time we have his body...for all the good it does. I haven't even been able to find out what killed him!..."

"You cannot blame yourself, Doctor. There was nothing you could have done."

"I know. All I can do...is offer you advice when you feel you need it - as he told me to do. And at this moment - I advise you to accept the Captaincy, if it is offered to you. Please, Spock."

The Vulcan looked at McCoy, his face strangely gentle. "Very well. If I am offered the position - and it is by no means certain that I will be - I will accept it. But I will...need you beside me, Doctor."

McCoy nodded. "I'll stay with you. Now - now that that's settled, will you come and eat?"

Slowly, Spock shook his head. "I can't. Not yet. I must still...learn to

accept that Jim is dead. Strange...I was certain that I would feel his death... in my mind, as I did when the Intrepid died. But I did not. I know he is dead, but I cannot believe it. It is...illogical."

"No, Spock. It's Human. You can't believe it because you don't want to believe it. I don't either. But it has happened, and we must accept it."

"Do you think I don't realise that?" Spock gave a long, shuddering sigh. "Please, don't say anything more on the subject. Let me come to terms with it in my own way."

They were still three days from Starbase Five when Starfleet contacted them urgently. Admiral Komack's face stared gravely from the viewscreen.

"The colony on Beta Piscium 12 reports that it is under attack by a hostile race, believed to be neither Klingon nor Romulan. You will divert to assist the colonists."

"Admiral," Spock put in. "I am compelled to remind you that at present the Enterprise has no Captain - "

"Mr. Spock, you have an excellent record," was the firm reply. "You are highly experienced and overdue for promotion. Success in this mission will ensure your promotion to Captain of the Enterprise. You will proceed as ordered. Admiral Komack, Starfleet, out." The viewscreen blanked out, then the normal display of stars appeared.

Spock closed his eyes for a second. He had already concluded that while Kirk's body was still on board, he would be unable to accept his loss. Little thought he relished the thought of an autopsy on Kirk, it had been almost a relief to realise that in three days they would be able to hand the bodies over to the Starbase medical section to see if the doctors there could find something McCoy had missed. Privately, Spock considered it unlikely that they would. Now they would have to retain the bodies for an indefinite period.

"Mr. Chekov, plot a course for Beta Piscium."

"...plotted and laid in, sir."

"Execute."

The great Starship swung gracefully onto her new course.

"Warp factor six, Mr. Sulu."

"Warp six, sir."

Skilfully concealing the wearied resignation that he felt, Spock went over to his neglected station at the library computer, wanting to check out details on the threatened colony.

It was a planet of an A-spectrum sun, swinging round its primary in a wide orbit estimated at 98.4 standard years. The ruins of a high-level civilisation had been found on it, but it was not certain how old they were; probably about a thousand standard years. The ruins were not extensive, being very localised in small pockets; and among the ruins, there were indications that the race, sparse though it appeared to have been, had had space-flight capacity. Some skeletons had been found, of a tall humanoid race with a rather large cranial capacity. It was considered possible that the inhabitants had in fact also been colonists from some unknown planet but that the colony, for reasons unknown, had either died out or been abandoned. The latter was perfectly possible - with a year almost a standard century in length, it was probable that as yet unrealised difficulties or insoluble problems might arise. The planet seemed fertile; it appeared to lack specific seasons, having a reasonably temperate climate round a wide belt that covered at least half of it, since its axis was a bare degree from the vertical. An experimental farming colony had been set up on it that had so far more than paid its way.

But it was dangerously near the edge of Federation controlled territory, close to unexplored space. Now, it seemed, that unexplored space had spawned a race that attacked strangers on sight. Spock suppressed a tired sigh. Why were so many intelligent races so bloodthirsty? All right, Vulcan had had its violent past, too; but Vulcan had overcome it. Why had so few other races? Surely their civilisations were advanced enough to permit them to agree to differ with other races. He passed on to study the reports recorded by Uhura regarding the attacks.

So far, the only thing that had saved the colony on Beta Piscium 12 was the wide dispersal of its settlers into many small communities, and the fact that there seemed to be only one attacking ship. It had picked off one or two communities, although most of the inhabitants of these had been out in the fields working and had escaped; but many of its attacks had, strangely enough, been aimed at the ruins. It was as if the crew of the attacker could recognise the ruins as centres of habitation but could not detect that they were no longer in use. Interesting. That must mean that the attacker's sensor equipment was not as accurate or as sensitive as the Federation's. What was the comparative level of their other equipment, though?

The enemy vessel was large. It was rocket-shaped and rather longer than the Enterprise. Sensors indicated that it was in fact powered by rockets - although it was a very sophisticated rocket; the vessel did not lack manoeuvrability. As the Enterprise swung round Beta Piscium 12 towards it, it reacted swiftly, moving into a defensive position.

"Open a channel, Lieutenant," Spock ordered.

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"This is Commander Spock of the U.S.S. Enterprise, representing the United Federation of Planets," Spock announced. "You have attacked one of our colony worlds. Please state your reasons."

Only the faint crackle of static broke the silence.

"They don't respond, Mr. Spock," Uhura said.

"U.S.S. Enterprise to alien vessel. Please identify yourself."

The silence continued unbroken. Spock raised an eyebrow. "It would appear that they do not desire contact," he said unnecessarily. "Close the channel, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

The Vulcan Acting Captain stared unseeingly at the viewscreen. Now what? His orders were to assist the colonists. How could they even begin to do so if the enemy refused any contact? How could he make any decisions when he only knew one side of the situation?

"Signs of energy readings building up on board the enemy ship, Mr. Spock," Chekov reported from the library computer sensors.

"Deflector shields on maximum, Mr. Sulu." That at least was a decision easy to make.

"Shields on maximum, Mr. Spock."

"Power readings now very high," Chekov continued. He had barely uttered the last word when the ship shook violently.

"Mr. Chekov?"

"Power readings now minimal...but beginning to rise again, sir," Chekov reported. "All shields holding."

Spock's eyebrow lifted considerably. A weapon, probably similar to a phaser, but whose rays were invisible. How had this alien race managed it? It took a decided effort to drag his mind from contemplation of the accomplishment

and back to the problem of how to counteract it.

"Power nearly at firing level again, sir," Chekov put in.

Unfortunate, Spock thought. But he had to defend Jim's ship. "Fire all phasers, Mr. Sulu."

... "All phasers fired, sir."

"No damage, Mr. Spock," Chekov announced. "Their shields are holding." Then almost without a pause, "Their power readings are at firing level again."

"Stand by for their attack," Spock said quietly. Moments later, the ship shook again. "Damage, Lieutenant?"

"All decks report no damage, sir," Uhura relayed from the reports reaching her. "One casualty in engineering."

"Shields still holding firm," Chekov said jubilantly. Then, gloomily, "Their power levels are beginning to rise."

"Hmmm. Do they have any other weapon, I wonder?" Spock mused. "It would seem illogical to continue using a mode of attack that had been proven ineffectual if a second method is available... Mr. Sulu. Arm photon torpedoes."

"Armed, sir."

"Power level increasing rapidly, sir," Chekov said.

"Fire one."

"One fired, sir."

"Direct hit," Chekov reported unnecessarily. They could see the hit in the viewscreen. "No damage."

"Fire two."

"Two fired, sir."

"Missed," Chekov reported.

"Fire three."

"Three fired."

"Another direct hit," Chekov said. "No damage. Their power is at firing level again... Our shields are holding steady, Mr. Spock." A pause. "Their power level is holding steady too. Minimum power."

"Possibly they have decided that our defences are too strong...or they have a further weapon they now wish to try," Spock said. "We cannot pierce their defence either, however. Is this the situation that Humans would call a 'stand-off'?"

"Yes, sir," Sulu answered.

Spock nodded. "Disengage photon torpedoes. Stand by to fire phasers again if they attempt another attack. Lt. Uhura, open a channel. They may accept contact this time."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"This is Commander Spock of the U.S.S. Enterprise. What is your reason for attacking us?"

The resulting silence could almost be felt.

Since it seemed obvious that the enemy vessel was not going to attack again, at least not at once, Spock left Scott in command and went to his cabin to think over the matter in privacy. It required a conscious effort before he managed to relax sufficiently to permit his subconscious to begin considering the data.

One thing he realised clearly at last; McCoy had been right. He owed it to Jim to continue with his work; to keep the Enterprise 'the finest Starship in the Fleet' - and perhaps it would be easier doing so than accepting a new commanding officer to whom he would, as a Vulcan, automatically give his loyalty. To see someone else in Jim's place...no. Disinter his ambition from the unmourned grave where he had buried it the first time Jim had smiled at him in open friendship. But - first he had to solve this problem. This was the test of his ability to command as Jim had done.

He considered his options. One ship against one ship, evenly matched, evenly armed, evenly defended. They had already proved that martial force was ineffective in these circumstances. He could ask for help...but that would be to admit defeat. Quite apart from his prospects for promotion, to admit defeat would betray Jim, and that he would not do. If the enemy ship send for reinforcements, then...but they had not broken radio silence. Might they be expecting reinforcements anyway? Unlikely. Until the Enterprise arrived, the alien vessel had been master of the situation...

Evacuate the colony? Spock shook his head. That also would be a surrender. But what other course of action was open to him?

He rose wearily. Leaving the cabin, he paced deliberately along the corridors, choosing not to use the turbolift because that would take him to his destination so much quicker; and he was strangely reluctant to reach that destination. But at last his unwilling feet carried him to the ship's morgue.

He slid Kirk's body out of its freezer compartment and stood looking down at it, not really seeing it for the image in his mind of a Kirk alive, alert, active and smiling affectionately.

Jim, he thought. *Jim, in this situation, what would you do?*

Spock emptied his mind completely, hoping that here, standing beside his dead Captain's body, some inspiration might come. He stood there for a long time.

Slowly, so slowly that at first he didn't realise it was not his own reaction, his mind registered an awareness of cold. A cold so intense, so numbing, that it blanked every other thought out of consciousness. Spock shivered involuntarily. Yes, it was cold...but not as unbearably cold as the thought indicated. He glanced round to see who else had entered, but he was still alone. Alone except for the body beside him.

Kirk? Kirk's thoughts?

Spock reached down, and without any of the revulsion a Human might have experienced at the thought of touching a corpse, he placed his fingers to the Captain's head, reaching out with his mind.

Jim?

The thought was faint, barely more detectable than it had been without the physical contact. *Cold.....*

Jim.

...Spock? Help me... so cold...

Spock lifted the stiffened body easily. He turned to the door.

McCoy looked up from the autopsy report that he was studying for the fiftieth time, his fatigue-reddened eyes blinking as his gaze focussed on the Vulcan's burden. Spock crossed to a bed and placed his Captain's body carefully on it.

"Are you out of your Vulcan mind?" McCoy asked irritably. "Why on earth..."

"Doctor, I have detected coherent thought in the Captain's mind - "

"What!"

" - He is aware of intense cold... I believe that he is alive and that by some chance the freezing process in the morgue acted to suspend animation as if it had been done deliberately in a hospital to - "

"Yes, I know why we use deep freezing procedures," McCoy growled. After a moment of stunned disbelief he had moved quickly, and he was already spreading a thermal blanket over the prone figure. He touched the switch to activate the diagnostic panel. The needles jerked fractionally upwards.

"Alive all right...if we can keep him alive..." McCoy muttered.

"Doctor, I suggest we fetch the bodies of Mr. Brewster and Mr. Udo. They also might be in a state of suspended animation."

"Yes, of course." McCoy moved to the lab door. "Corso, Ossowski. Go and get Brewster and Udo from the morgue. Be careful with them - they may be alive." He returned to Kirk's side, his face still showing near disbelief.

Spock looked down at Kirk's face for a moment longer, his expression strangely gentle. "Prognosis, Doctor?"

McCoy shook his head. "Too soon to say, Spock. And even if he lives, he may not recover fully. He's been frozen rather longer than recommended. In addition, there was no respiration discernable for several hours prior to freezing - and no pulse, therefore no circulation. There may be brain damage. There may not."

They were interrupted by the orderlies wheeling in the other two bodies. McCoy hurried to attend to them. He pulled blankets over them and flicked the switches. The needles on the panel above Brewster jerked and slid upwards slightly. Udo's panel remained obstinately unmoving. McCoy reached for a hypo.

Spock watched him for a moment then glanced back at Kirk. Knowing himself to be unobserved - McCoy and both orderlies were fussing round Udo's body - Spock reached out quickly and touched Kirk's face lightly, fleetingly. Then he turned towards the door. He still had a problem to solve.

He headed back towards the bridge. He had already been away from it for far too long - much longer than he had originally intended.

Scott looked round as Spock left the elevator and rose to let the Vulcan assume the command chair, aware of a slight feeling of relief that he was no longer in the hot seat. The lack of response from the enemy ship was unnerving, even although Scott was not a nervous man. Perhaps that was what the aliens were wanting - to upset their opponents by making them nervous.

Spock sat down gratefully; his legs were feeling strangely weak.

"Present status, Mr. Scott?"

"No change, sir. They've made no hostile move, but they've made no attempt to contact us either."

"That is hardly surprising, Mr. Scott. If they had been prepared to talk, they would have responded to our signal."

Scott watched sympathetically as Spock steepled his fingers and contemplated them. Then he moved over to the engineering station. There might be very little concrete assistance he could give the Vulcan, but he could at least be there, on the bridge, offering moral support. Little thought Spock might show it, over the years Scott had come to realise that the Vulcan did in fact appreciate the silent sympathy and support of his friends.

What would Jim do? Spock thought. He could, of course, stall, wait until Kirk regained consciousness and leave the decision to him...provided Jim was then mentally active enough to make a decision...but that would be the coward's way out. Spock's stubborn pride refused to consider it. Besides, there was Jim's declared opinion of Spock's abilities...and, seemingly, the crew's, if McCoy had been telling the truth. The Vulcan knew that he didn't want to betray that opinion. He wanted to be able to report to Jim that he had found a solution to a problem the

Captain didn't even know existed. Even if that solution was the one Jim himself would have found...especially if it was the solution Jim would have found.

What would Jim do?

Spock thought back over some of the situations Kirk had contended with. He had used bluff often...but Spock suspected that, with the best will in the universe, he could not carry out a successful bluff. Even if he could...what bluff could he use in this situation? If the aliens would only accept contact....!

Wait, though. Although the aliens had not responded to his attempts at communication, it was almost certain that they were, in fact, receiving the signal.

"Open a channel, Lieutenant," he ordered pensively.

"Hailing frequencies open, sir," Uhura said, a hint of tired frustration in her voice. He noted it, with a touch of sympathy. He also was experiencing some irritation at the aliens' continued refusal to talk.

"This is Commander Spock of the U.S.S. Enterprise calling unidentified alien ship. It is obviously clear to you that our vessels are of comparable power and that we are in a state of impasse. It must be equally clear to you that this situation cannot continue indefinitely. We have a claim to this planet in that we have established a colony on it. There was no indication of any other colonisation at this time, but if you feel you have a prior claim, we are prepared to discuss it with you."

"No response, sir," Uhura said in a tone that indicated that it was exactly what she had expected. Spock nodded. It was what he had expected as well.

"We must make them listen, then," he said.

"But how, Mr. Spock?" Scott exploded.

"By beaming someone over on to their bridge," Spock replied calmly.

The bridge crew stared at him as if he had suddenly sprouted a second head. He looked over to the library computer. "Mr. Chekov - can you pinpoint their bridge?"

"I think so, sir..." He bent over the sensor intently.

"Mr. Spock - wouldn't it be better to beam one of them over here?" Scott asked.

"We could, of course, do that, Mr. Scott," Spock admitted. "But what guarantee would we have that we had, in fact, locked on to an important member of their crew? Even on the bridge, we might pinpoint someone no more important than a yeoman bringing in a standard report. In an attack situation, such a crewman would become highly expendable - a pawn whose importance is negligible. No, we must send someone over. And since I am the ranking officer here, the task must be mine. If I fail... If I fail, we will know we are dealing with a totally intractable race, probably as dangerous as the Romulans, and you must inform Starfleet of that fact."

Scott looked searchingly at Spock. A few hours ago, he would have said that Spock was suffering from a death wish, but there was a subtle difference in his attitude since his last absence from the bridge; he clearly did believe that this was the only way to reach a solution - and what he said was true. In the absence of a trained diplomat, the ranking officer present was the one empowered to make diplomatic decisions.

"Have you found the co-ordinates yet, Mr. Chekov?" Spock went on.

"I think... Yes, Mr. Spock."

"Inform the transporter room. Mr. Sulu - I will inform you as soon as I am ready to beam over. Drop the shields on my signal, and re-establish as soon as transport is confirmed." Mentally he was hoping that the aliens' shield could be penetrated by their transporter. If not - scratch the idea and try to find another.

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Scott, you have the con."

"Good luck, sir," Scott said quietly. Spock looked straight at him for a moment without replying, then turned and entered the elevator.

His first thought on materialising was that it was no wonder the attacking ship was so large. Himself tall enough to tower over most of the Enterprise's crew, he was dwarfed by the huge alien standing near by. He stared in a fascinated silence at the aliens, only half aware that they were studying him as intently.

The aliens were fully eight feet tall. They were humanoid, without in any way resembling a Human. Their scaly bronze green faces were topped by crests of varying magnificence; several carried their crests flattened against their heads, but the standing alien carried his high, flaring wide in proud display. His lidless eyes blinked as a nictating membrane passed over them. Spock's first coherent thought was that this race was of reptilian origin rather than mammalian.

"Who are you?" the alien asked, utter bewilderment in his voice.

"Spock of Vulcan, representing the United Federation of Planets."

The alien's scaled face was incapable of frowning, but the angle of its head was eloquent. "I do not understand," it said.

"You thought we were someone else, perhaps?" Spock asked.

"Yes... My apologies, Spock of Vulcan. But..." The puzzled voice trailed off.

"But?"

"We received your earlier communications. We did not believe... This world is the home planet of my people. How can you have a colony here?"

"There was no sentient life on the planet when Federation scouts found it," Spock said, almost sympathetically. "Only ruins almost a planetary century old."

Shock showed on the alien face, immobile though it had appeared to be. "So old?"

"That is our estimate."

The beautiful crest drooped, giving an impression of utter hopelessness. "This is the home world of my people," the alien repeated. "Three to four generations ago, there was a war. Our ancestors were of a less technologically advanced race and were defeated, their country over-run. Those who were not content to become as slaves were forcibly deported to another solar system which had only recently been discovered - and was known to have little of value to the conquerors. A few liberal-minded of the conquerors were exiled too, for daring to suggest that even the conquered had rights. They were our first teachers... We taught ourselves technology, urged on by the need to win back our own land, and at last succeeded in developing space flight. My ship came to reconnoiter, and seized the opportunity offered us to attack...but now you tell me we have attacked your people, who have done us no harm. It makes us as bad as those we thought we fought."

"No," Spock said. "You had no way of knowing that the present inhabitants of the planet are no longer those you sought. And while the desire for revenge is no longer a thing my people ever experience, historically we were warlike and I do understand it. All we ask is that you meet us now with open minds."

"We will do so." The crest lifted slightly.

"And since the colonists also have a viewpoint, I suggest that we meet on the planet with their leader."

"Willingly."

"I will speak with them, and let you know time and place. Will you now contact my ship and ask them to beam me back on board."

The crest lifted a little further. "Gladly. And until our next meeting, Chavex of Mlexa bids you farewell."

Spock was greeted aboard the Enterprise with an exuberance that at first surprised and then touched him. He had never realised before that he was actually liked; and the discovery that his fellow officers had actually been worried about him was somehow warming.

He went first to the bridge; ordered Uhura to contact the leader of the colonists so that he could arrange a meeting with the aliens, then, that done, he told her to relay everything to Starfleet - including the information that Captain Kirk was alive.

"Alive?" The bridge crew stared at Spock in utter amazement.

"Dr. McCoy is unsure as yet how fully the Captain will recover, however. Mr. Scott, carry on. I will be in sickbay."

In the solitude of the elevator, Spock allowed himself a luxurious stretch. The tension across his shoulders that he had not permitted himself to notice relaxed slightly. Provided Chavex of Mlexa proved trustworthy...

He put the matter to the back of his mind as he entered sickbay. McCoy was bending over one of the beds - and looking very unhappy.

"Doctor?" Spock was suddenly anxious again.

The surgeon jumped. "Oh, it's you, Spock. What do you mean, creeping in like a cat?" He had regained control of his facial muscles, and a Human might have wondered if he had imagined the expression on McCoy's face. The Vulcan knew he had not. It was a revelation to him. McCoy, ashamed of emotion?

"There was one casualty in engineering during the battle, Doctor. How is he?"

"Oh, Jarrold. He fell down the steps. A broken leg and a few bruises. Nothing serious. His pride's hurt more than anything else."

"And the Captain?"

"Hasn't come round yet but his temperature's nearly back to normal. The readings all look satisfactory."

"Good. What about the other two?"

"Brewster's responding well, but Udo's definitely dead." McCoy did sound depressed, Spock thought, his keen ear catching the trace of weariness in the surgeon's voice. Odd. Certainly, Udo was dead and McCoy hated losing a patient, but since Kirk - and Brewster as bonus - were alive after all, he would have expected McCoy to be delighted, bubbling over with the vehement exuberance that Spock regarded with amused tolerance.

"What is it?" Spock asked softly.

"What is what?" McCoy asked, too quickly. Spock looked at him with a quiet patience that defied the bluster, and McCoy found himself unable to meet the Vulcan's eyes.

"Tell me," Spock insisted. "Is there... Is Jim still in danger?"

"Under the circumstances, until he actually comes round, I won't know. I told you - there could be brain damage. The readings look all right, but that isn't conclusive."

Spock still looked directly at him, patiently waiting, instinct telling him that there was more to McCoy's depression than fear for Kirk.

"That isn't all, is it?" he asked gently.

McCoy gave in. "No."

"Tell me, then. You've said to me in the past that it helps to share your troubles. Try your own prescription for once."

McCoy drew a deep breath. "It's Yates, Spock."

The Vulcan waited.

"I keep thinking... Was he really dead, like Udo - or did I kill him when I performed the autopsy?"

The impact of the question hit Spock like a douche of cold water. There was no easy answer, no real reassurance that he could give.

"All your diagnostic aids reported Mr. Yates dead, Doctor," he said at last. "If you do not believe your instruments, you might as well give up practising medicine."

"Those same diagnostic scanners reported Jim and Brewster dead too, but they weren't."

"The odds on such an occurrence happening once are very high. The chance of the situation repeating itself are incalculable - "

"But it did. Jim - and Brewster. That's two."

"And for it to happen three times... No, Doctor. I am convinced that it could not have occurred three times, even all at once. I am sure in my own mind that Mr. Yates was indeed dead when he was brought aboard."

"Are you, Spock? Are you really? Or are you just being...kind?"

"I would not lie simply for the sake of what you call 'kindness', Doctor. I am convinced that Mr. Yates was dead."

"All right. Then was the autopsy itself necessary?"

"What killed Udo and Yates and left the other two apparently dead?" Spock asked.

"I don't know."

"Was there any way you might have found out?"

"Only by performing an autopsy," McCoy admitted.

Spock looked down at Kirk's relaxed face. "The Captain might be able to shed some light on the matter once he regains consciousness," he suggested.

"If he's capable of coherent thought at all," McCoy said gloomily.

"I believe he will be. Even unconscious and frozen, his mind recognised me and communicated with me. I think it likely that he has escaped permanent injury."

"I hope you're right," McCoy said fervently.

"Let me know as soon as there is any change in his condition. I will be in my quarters."

"Yes, of course." McCoy ut aside his depression long enough to register th that the Vulcan looked tired. Little wonder...but he was at least going to his quarters - hopefully to rest.

The doctor watched Spock leave. His face resumed the unhapp, haunted expression he had been wearing earlier. Had he killed Yates? He would never know.

Unhappily, he sat down between his two living patients, and waited quietly for them to regain consciousness.

A STEP IN TIME by Valerie Piacentini

The journey through the Time Gate had been intended as a peaceful relaxation for Kirk and McCoy; for the historians the Enterprise had brought to the Time Planet, it was a much more serious affair. Once the formalities had been arranged, Kirk felt free to turn to a more personal matter. McCoy had been under a great deal of strain; ideally, he should have taken shore leave, but there was no prospect of that in the near future, and with his usual stubbornness, he refused to be relieved of duty.

As the next best thing, Kirk suggested that he and McCoy should take advantage of their enforced wait at the Time Planet, and themselves take a trip into the past. He told Bones that as a child he had been promised a trip to London, a trip that had been cancelled because of an illness; he had never had that holiday, and had always regretted it.

"Come with me, Bones," he suggested. "I know I can use the break, and I'm sure you can; it'll only be a couple of days, but we can see the sights, take in a show, have a bit of a rest." McCoy agreed readily; he knew himself he needed a break, and it might be fun.

The ship's stores provided them with the appropriate clothes and money, and it was with an almost forgotten sense of anticipation that they passed through the Time Gate, and stepped from an alley into a busy London street.

They spent the next two days simply enjoying their holiday, revelling in the freedom of tourists as they visited the historic sites by day, and in the evening joined in the varied night life of the city. Over breakfast on their third morning, McCoy said,

"I don't know about you, Jim, but I feel like being thoroughly lazy this morning."

"Good idea. Let's go to the park and feed the ducks." In response to McCoy's quizzical glance, he went on defensively, "Well, I read about it once. People do that sort of thing in London, and I promised myself that if I ever got to London, I'd have a go."

"All right, then, as long as we find somewhere quiet."

When they left the hotel, Jim insisted on buying some bread. McCoy was teasing him about it as they waited to cross the road, when their attention was caught by a car that had stopped for the traffic lights; there was something familiar about the tall dignified figure in the back seat. Curious, Jim moved for a better look, then said, "Look, Bones. It's Sarek."

It was indeed the Vulcan Ambassador, Spock's father, younger than they knew him, but unmistakable. As the car moved off, Bones said, laughing, "Well, they do say that if you spend long enough in London you'll meet everyone you know, but I don't think they had this in mind."

The sheer normality of the scene in the park was a tonic to the two men, for whom the unexpected, the dangerous, sometimes the terrible, were part of everyday life. Here, on the cool grass, children played, dogs ran barking, lovers walked hand in hand as they had done for centuries. On the lake, the birds waited expectantly for the food that long generations of experience had taught them would be forthcoming.

At last their aimless strolling brought them to an area of the park which seemed to be deserted. They came through a belt of trees to find themselves standing on the crest of a slope which ran down to the water's edge; the bank rose in a curve, forming a small bay sheltered from view by the trees. Feeling like a rest after their walk, Jim and McCoy stretched out on the grass, enjoying

the warm sunshine on their faces. After a few minutes, Bones touched Jim on the arm, and pointed silently. Below them at the water's edge a child had appeared as if from nowhere. Kneeling on the bank, he was offering food to a pair of magnificent swans; the birds showed no fear, but glided closer, at last bending their graceful necks to take the food from his fingers. A flash of colour sped from the bushes below them to the boy's foot - a red squirrel, showing no trace of timidity, had run up to claim his share. The child laughed softly, and held something out; the squirrel took it, and sat up on its haunches to nibble contentedly. The two men smiled, enjoying the scene - the confidence of the normally shy squirrel, the grace of the birds, the child's pleasure in his companions. Then suddenly, horribly, the tranquillity of the scene was shattered. With no warning, a shower of stones hurtled down on the group; the swans vanished in a flurry of white wings, but the squirrel was not fast enough - he lay broken and bleeding beneath a jagged rock.

A group of children came through the bushes to stand in a semi-circle round the boy. Their faces were sullen and hostile, and each carried a stick or a piece of stone. Though he must have been aware of their presence, the boy, who was bending over the squirrel, did not react at once; he gently laid the broken little body down on the grass, his fingers lingering for a moment on the soft fur, before he stood and faced the intruders.

Jim could not repress a gasp of astonishment as he saw the boy's face for the first time. There was no mistaking the slanting eyebrows or the elegant pointed ears; a Vulcan child, perhaps seven years old Jim estimated, about half the age of the children who now surrounded him. The menace in their attitude was unmistakable, but the child showed no fear in the face of their hostility. He knew there was no escape, and with the dignity of his race composed himself to meet whatever might come. At first, only words, which he could pretend not to hear.

"Freak! Halfbreed freak!"

"With those ears, he should be in a circus!"

"Devil child! You've got no right here!"

"Why don't you go back to your own world - monster!"

The insults grew worse as the child's calm indifference enraged his tormentors. Jim felt his anger rising at the unfair odds, but for the moment he dared not interfere; he knew the risks of taking any action which might alter the past. Then the oldest of the children called out mockingly,

"Come on! Let's show Spock we mean it - we don't want him here!"

Spock! Was it possible? Jim's eyes flew to the face of the Vulcan child. Yes, it could be...it surely must be. He would be about the right age, and they had seen Sarek only that morning. He turned to McCoy, but the question on his lips was never spoken, for the doctor's face was white, and his eyes wide with horror.

"My God, No!" screamed Bones. "Stop!"

It was too late. Even as Jim turned back to the scene below, the barrage of sticks and rocks struck the Vulcan child, and he crumpled to the grass. In the same instant Jim and McCoy sprang to their feet and rushed forward. The children fled, startled by their sudden appearance, but neither of the men had time to be concerned with them. Sick with terror, Jim dropped to his knees beside McCoy, who was already at work.

"It's bad enough, but not too serious, apart from the wound on his head. The cut's deep, and there may be concussion. I'll give him a sedative to keep him out." He worked steadily for a few minutes, giving the injection and dressing the cut on the child's head. At last he sat back on his heels.

"Jim, my readings confirm it - the child is half Human. It's our Spock, all right. I've got to keep him under for a while - he mustn't see us. Trouble

is, we can't stay here and I don't want to move him too far; he's had a bad shock, and it could be dangerous. We can't leave him like this, yet if he comes round and gets a good look at us, heaven knows what complications that will cause."

"We'll worry about that later. We should get under cover, though - there's a hut among those trees; we can take him there, and you can keep an eye on him."

As they walked back through the trees, Jim tried to control his confused thoughts. It was difficult to realise that the child in his arms would grow up to become his First Officer. Spock - dependable, trustworthy, unshakably loyal Spock, as dear to him as a brother. Disjointed memories of the past - or the future - came through to him.

..... "You would not...have survived this... "

..... "You know, of course, I could never have made it without you... "

..... "Listen to me, Jim. Be with me. They are only illusions... "

So many times, defeat turned into victory, danger into safety, the risks shared, perils overcome, the joy and the agony.

How would it be - he could not imagine how it would be - to return to a world that did not hold Spock. The child was in danger, he could read it in McCoy's eyes. Was this part of Spock's past, or had their presence altered things? He would not know until he returned to the Enterprise.

When they reached the hut he laid Spock down on a pile of sacks in the corner. McCoy passed his medical tricorder over him, and sighed in relief.

"I think he's going to be all right."

Their eyes met.

"You felt it too, didn't you, Bones?"

"I must be going soft in the head!" Then, quietly, "Yes. I suddenly realised that I could not contemplate the idea of losing Spock; it'd be like losing part of myself. But if you ever tell him I said so...!"

Jim nodded; he knew only too well the solid affection and friendship for Spock that underlay McCoy's sarcasm. Then to his surprise, the doctor continued in a tone of bitter self-disgust,

"I thought I was so clever - that I understood him. How could I even begin to guess at - this! Think of it, Jim; think what his childhood must have been like! Yet somehow, by some miracle, I swear, he became the man he is. We both know what he's done for us on the Enterprise; we could never begin to understand how much he had to forgive."

"You said it yourself, Bones. That's the kind of man he is."

As the afternoon passed, the shadows lengthened under the trees, and the child slept on. From time to time McCoy leaned over to check his progress, and was satisfied. Twilight was fading into dusk when Spock stirred and woke. In the dim light the two men could see his face only faintly, the dark eyes wide with surprise; their own faces were hidden from him in the shadows.

"Where am I? Who are you?" The questions came calmly, as only Spock could have asked them under such conditions.

"Do you remember what happened?" McCoy's voice was very gentle.

"Yes, I remember. The children...you must not blame them...they do not understand. I must seem a - freak - to them. In time, they will learn."

For a moment, Jim felt tears sting his eyes. Even so would the adult Spock have reacted.

"You were hurt," he said softly. "If you feel up to it, we will take you home now - your parents will be worried."

"Thank you, I am quite recovered. But who are you?"

"Forgive me, but I cannot tell you that, nor can I explain why we must not be seen. Can you trust us?"

The child considered for a moment, then smiled. "As you wish. I think - no, I am sure - that I can trust you."

"Thank you, Spock."

"You know me?" The question came swiftly; even at seven, he missed nothing.

"One of the children called you by name," McCoy broke in. "We must be going now - I don't think we have much time."

Jim too had felt the familiar sensation that warned him that their stay in the past was drawing to a close; soon the Guardian of Forever would reach out for them, and return them to their own time.

Guided by Spock, they set off towardsthe Vulcan Embassy, where Sarek and his family were staying. Accepting their wish for concealment, he led them to the rear of the building, and showed them where to climb the wall into the garden. Across the lawn they could see the tall figure of a woman restlessly pacing the terrace.

"My mother, the Lady Amanda," whispered Spock. "Will you not meet her - she will wish to thank you."

"No, we must go now," said Jim. "Don't keep your mother waiting any longer." Still the child lingered.

"Then I must try to thank you myself." He extended his hand, fingers spread in the Vulcan fashion. "Live long and prosper. I believe we will meet again."

Gently, Jim touched his fingertips to those of the child. "I hope so. Live long and prosper, Spock of Vulcan."

Turning, the child held out his hand to McCoy. "Thank you for your care. I think that we too will meet again."

"Farewell, Spock. Try not to judge all Humans by those children."

"I could not, after meeting you. Farewell." He inclined his head gravely, and was gone, running across the lawn to the woman, who knelt, arms wide, to receive him. As mother and son met, the scene faded around them, and Jim and Bones were standing on the sand before the Guardian of Forever. Jim pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise - Scott here."

"Two to beam up, Scotty."

As they stepped down from the transporter platform, they were surprised to see Spock himself at the controls.

"Something wrong, Mr. Spock?"

"No, Captain, all is in order. I trust you and the Doctor had a restful trip."

"Hardly restful, Mr. Spock. Eventful, perhaps."

"I see. My calculations were correct, then."

"Your calculations?"

For answer Spock lifted a hand to his forehead, just where the stone had struck him all those years - or hours - ago.

"When I was seven, I visited London with my parents. I was - hurt, and two

men helped me. I never saw their faces, or heard their names - until I joined the Enterprise."

"How long have you known?"

"I did not at first. I came to recognise you only as I knew you better; and I realised that for you, the event had not yet happened. When you left, I knew when and where the Time Gate would take you, and that I could speak of it at last."

"It's quite a coincidence, though," said Jim, "that out of all the people in London, it should have been Bones and I who found you."

"Coincidence? I think not." McCoy spoke softly, seriously, his usual sarcastic wit laid aside. "I think that the bonds of friendship that hold us were strong enough to draw us together, even out of our own time."

"For once, Doctor, I would not disagree." For a moment the smile of the child Spock had been lit his usually impassive face. McCoy returned the smile warmly, and Jim grinned in relief. It would not last, of course; soon they'd be back to the usual bickering, but he knew that they all had a better understanding of the very real affection that linked them.

It was good to be home.

THE RIDDLE by T.G.Z.C.

What do they want from me, the Vians?
 They have not injured me, they care for me,
 I have more comfort here than in my home;
 Here I have privacy, although.....
 I think they have some way of watching me.
 This place is all enclosed...and very dark.
 I searched and searched and found no exit from it -
 Why do they keep me from the cool, fresh air?
 What do they want from me? I have no way
 To ask them what I want to know -- and they -
 It seems they do not wish that I should know.
 I touched them...but it did not help;
 Their thoughts are strange...distant, detached.
 They do not seem sadistically cruel
 Yet since they brought me here two men have died...
 And now three more have come. I am afraid.

Kirk: Bones, did you hear about the horse that jumped over the moon?

McCoy: No, what about it?

Kirk: It was a nightmare.

* * * * *

Kirk: Well, Mr. Chekov, this is your first experience of navigating a Starship. Have you worked out our present position?

Chekov (whispering): I think we should all be standing to attention, sir.

Kirk: Why? And why are you whispering?

Chekov: According to my calculations, we are just passing through the Kremlin...

ARA by Janet Quarton

The U.S.S. Enterprise entered orbit around Auriga 3; Kirk sat in his command chair studying the planet's surface on the main viewing screen. He turned to Mr. Spock, who was at his console analysing data on the planet.

"Analysis, Mr. Spock."

"The planet is class M," Spock said. "I get humanoid life form readings. They seem to be in fairly small groups, no indications of large cities. Civilization rates about G, similar to that in the United States of America, Earth, in the mid-eighteen hundreds."

Kirk considered the information for a moment. "Spock, do you think we can conduct our survey without coming into contact with the planet's inhabitants?"

"It should be possible to do so, Captain. The planet's surface is not very densely populated."

Kirk nodded and turned to Uhura.

"Lt. Uhura, contact Dr. McCoy and that new man - Ensign Freeman. Tell them both to report to the Transporter Room in ten minutes for landing party duty. Tell Mr. Scott to report to the bridge immediately."

"Aye, aye, sir." Uhura acknowledged the order and set about obeying it. Kirk got up and made his way over to Spock.

"Spock, do we have any information on this planet?"

"No, sir, we are the first ship to enter this solar system. There are no records of any other ship having been in this area."

"As I thought. In that case the Prime Directive is in full force." Kirk stopped speaking and turned, having heard the elevator doors. Scott entered the bridge and joined Kirk and Spock.

"Ah, Scotty," Kirk said, smiling at his engineer. "Spock and I are taking a landing party down to the planet's surface. While we're away I want you to take the Enterprise and survey this planet's two moons. We're due at Starbase 11 in two weeks and I'd rather not be late; this will save us a couple of days." Seeing a query on Spock's face, he asked, "What is it, Spock?"

"It will mean that we will be beyond communicator range of the ship, sir."

"We'll take an emergency beacon with us. Scotty, if you pick up a signal from it head straight back and contact us. If you don't hear from us, we'll contact you in forty-eight hours; be back by then. You have the con, Scotty."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"C'mon, Mr. Chekov. You can join the landing party."

"Yes, sir." Chekov was elated at the thought of a change from routine duties. He left his station and entered the turbo-lift with Kirk and Spock. Scott signalled another crewman to take over the navigation console.

Kirk entered the transporter room to find the rest of the landing party waiting for him, already equipped. Spock and Chekov had tricorders, McCoy had his medical tricorder and emergency medical kit, Ensign Freeman carried a couple of packs of food rations. Knowing that Spock would have made sure they had everything necessary, Kirk picked up the emergency beacon that was sitting by the console and spoke to the transporter chief.

"Prepare to beam us down, Mr. Kyle."

"Aye, sir," Kyle replied and set the controls. The landing party entered the transporter chamber and when everyone was in position, Kirk gave the order.

"Energise."

The transporter chief operated the controls and the landing party shimmered and dematerialised.

The group materialised near the bank of a fast-flowing river. It was hilly, barren country and some of the hills sloped right down to the edge of the river. The sides of the hills were strewn with rocks of all sizes.

After having a quick look round, Kirk took out his communicator and flipped it open. "Kirk to Enterprise. Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here, Sir."

"We've beamed down safely, Scotty. We'll rendezvous with you in forty-eight hours. Contact us as soon as you return."

"Aye, sir. Good luck. Scott out."

Kirk put away his communicator and went over to Spock, who was taking tricorder readings. "Are you picking up anything, Spock?" he asked.

"There is a village about three miles away, across the river, but I do not pick up any signs of humanoids closer to us than that."

"Good, with any luck they won't come to the river. Keep a check on readings, though, just in case."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk crossed to Chekov and Freeman and told them to go up the hillside and see what they could find. He cautioned them, saying, "Be careful where you are walking. Some of those rocks look loose."

They acknowledged and set off up the hill. Kirk walked along the river bank to where McCoy was standing, his medical kit and all their supplies sitting on a rock next to him. The hill sloped steeply up behind him. McCoy smiled at Kirk.

"This place isn't bad, is it, Jim. It's nice to see the blue sky and hear the sound of the river."

"Are you feeling homesick, Bones?"

"Not exactly, but it's nice to be off the ship for a while. It's a shame we couldn't send the whole crew down, we've had a rough time of it lately and they could do with a rest."

"We'll be at Starbase 11 in a couple of weeks. The crew will get shore leave there. They certainly deserve it."

"Well, I suggest you try to relax while we're here, Jim. You're looking all in."

"Don't worry so much, Bones. I'll relax with the crew on Starbase 11," Kirk replied cheerfully, but he thought that McCoy was more right than he knew. They had had a hard time lately and he was feeling all in. He was looking forward to that shore leave very much.

While Kirk and McCoy were talking, Chekov and Freeman were climbing the hillside behind them. Freeman was being a bit reckless and Chekov spoke to him about it.

"You'd better be careful, Freeman. You'll trip over some of those rocks."

"Don't worry about me. I used to play on hills like these as a kid. Just watch me!"

With that he ran across the hillside. He was passing directly behind Kirk and McCoy when his foot turned on a stone and he fell flat. The stone rolled down the hillside, taking more and more with it, starting a landslide.

Down below, his senior officers heard the rumble above their conversation; they looked round but were too late to run to safety. They were both knocked from their feet by rocks; the supplies and McCoy's medical kit were knocked into the river and carried away downstream.

McCoy struggled to his feet, feeling the pain from several bruises. Automatically, he began to check the gear, and found, to his dismay, that the supplies and his kit were gone, and his medical tricorder smashed. He turned angrily to Kirk.

"Jim, what the devil... Jim!"

Kirk was lying still, face down on the ground. McCoy ran to him.

"Jim!" he called anxiously, but Kirk didn't stir. McCoy quickly bent down beside him and felt for his pulse. To his relief he found it, weak but steady. He gently turned Kirk over and found that he was bleeding from a nasty cut on the side of his head.

Just then Spock appeared and hurried over to them. "I heard rocks falling, Doctor. What happened?"

"Something started a landslide. We were caught in its path."

Spock looked at Kirk and saw the cut. "How is he, Doctor?"

"He seems to be just knocked out. I can't check him properly, because my tricorder is smashed, my medical kit - and the supplies - have gone. I think they must have been swept away by the river. To be on the safe side, I think you'd better activate that beacon and bring the Enterprise back."

"I can't, Doctor. It was with the supplies. Look after the Captain as best you can - I'll send Chekov and Freeman to see if they can find any food and shelter."

McCoy nodded worriedly and Spock went off. McCoy took off his undergarment and tore a strip off it. He wet the strip in the river, and then, making it into a pad, bathed Kirk's head.

Kirk came to slowly. His head was aching viciously and for a moment he didn't know where he was. He struggled to sit up and felt himself being gently pushed back.

"Easy, Jim. Just lie quiet for a few minutes." It was McCoy's voice.

Kirk obeyed - he hadn't the strength to do otherwise. Recollection flooded back to him and he remembered the landslide. He tried to open his eyes, then shut them quickly as the glare of light sent a searing pain through his head.

McCoy, seeing the grimace of pain on Kirk's face, wished he had his medical kit so that he could do something to help. Still, he hadn't, so he would have to do the best he could with what he had. He took hold of Kirk's wrist, feeling for his pulse. It was still rather weak and McCoy wasn't happy. How he wished that he had his medical tricorder so that he could examine Kirk properly. That was the disadvantage of using machines for everything, you began to rely on them.

Kirk tried opening his eyes again, being careful to do it very slowly this time. It was quite a light and he screwed up his face against the pain. Eventually he managed it and after a few seconds his vision cleared and he looked up into the concerned face of Dr. McCoy. Kirk tried to speak.

"Bones..."

"Just keep still, Jim."

"I'm all right, Bones, I..."

Kirk tried to sit up. Suddenly his stomach turned and he rolled over and was violently sick. When the spasm passed he sank back to the ground exhausted,

his head pounding. McCoy went to the river and wet the cloth; he then went back to Kirk and wiped his face.

Feeling the damp cloth on his face, Kirk opened his eyes. McCoy smiled down at him. "Now maybe you'll do as you're told and lie still."

"What happened, Bones?"

McCoy told him about the landslide and how the supplies were all lost. Kirk frowned. Just then Spock came running up. He was pleased to see Kirk conscious, but hid it.

"Captain, there is a group of humanoids heading this way. If we are going to remain out of their sight we will have to move inland."

"Where are Chekov and Freeman?" Kirk asked.

"They are scouting around to see if they can find some food."

"Get them back here, quick."

"Yes, sir." Spock took out his communicator and flipped it open. "Chekov, this is Spock. Come in."

"Chekov here, sir."

"Have you found anything?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Then report back here immediately, with Mr. Freeman."

"On our way, sir."

Spock put the communicator away and looked at McCoy. "Is the Captain fit to travel, Doctor?"

"No, he isn't, Spock. Can we hang on here for another couple of hours to give him a chance to recover?"

"Sorry, Doctor, the aliens will be here within half an hour..."

"We've got to get out of here, Bones," Kirk interrupted. "Don't worry, I'll be O.K. Give me a hand up."

Both Spock and McCoy helped Kirk to his feet, where he stood swaying. If they had let go he would have fallen down. They helped him over to a rock and made him sit on it. The exertion had increased the pounding in Kirk's head and his stomach was churning. He gritted his teeth, fighting it down and trying to hide his discomfort, but he was not fooling them. They stood beside him, supporting him, till he began to recover. McCoy frowned at Spock.

"It's no use, Spock, this isn't going to work. Jim just can't walk."

The pounding in Kirk's head was beginning to ease and his stomach was settling. "I'll be all right, Bones," he whispered. It was a lie, of course, but he wasn't going to risk the others getting caught just because of his weakness.

"Sure you will. Just getting to your feet was almost too much for you. You might as well face the fact that you're as weak as a kitten and in no condition to go anywhere."

"Bones, we've got to move inland. We can't take the chance of those humanoids seeing us. Starfleet orders are quite specific on that point. We would be in direct violation of the Prime Directive."

"The Captain is quite right, Doctor," agreed Spock. "We cannot stay here. These are primitive people and primitive people tend to fear strangers. It is quite possible that they would attack us and we cannot use the phasers to defend ourselves. We must get out of sight. Here are Chekov and Freeman."

The junior officers came running up to them, slightly out of breath. Freeman saw Kirk sitting on the rock looking very pale and ill. He noticed the long gash on the side of Kirk's head and felt uneasy, guilty. He knew that all this was his fault but he didn't know what to say. He hung back and let Chekov do the talking.

"Sir, we've just seen a party of aliend heading this way. We were careful that they didn't see us, but they'll be here in about ten minutes."

"That settles it, Bones," Kirk said as firmly as he could manage. "We've got to leave."

He stood up and took a step forward. Spock was there to catch him as he fell. He gently laid his Captain on the ground. McCoy bent down and took Kirk's pulse; he frowned and pulled back Kirk's eyelid then turned to Spock.

"It's no use, he's out cold again."

Spock stood deep in thought for a moment, then he bent down and picked Kirk up in his arms. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Carrying Kirk's limp body, Spock started walking away from the river; the others followed. Chekov took continuous tricorder readings to make sure that they were not being followed or heading towards any more aliens.

As they headed away from the river they were surrounded by barren, rocky hills with no sign of greenery. The going underfoot was very rough. After they'd walked for about an hour, Spock came to a halt and carefully laid Kirk on the ground. The Captain was beginning to stir and to moan. McCoy was quickly at his side. He took Kirk's wrist and felt his pulse; he found it still weak and rather rapid. Standing up, he indicated to Spock that he wanted to speak with him. Spock acknowledged with a nod and turned to Chekov.

"Mr. Chekov, take Freeman and have a scout round. Don't go too far."

"Aye, sir."

As Chekov and Freeman left, Spock went over to McCoy. "How is he, Doctor?"

"He's beginning to come round. Can we stay here a while to give him a chance to rest? That was a bad blow he had and he's suffering from concussion and slight shock. He needs rest."

"We will stay here till nightfall and then head back to the river. We require water and have nothing to carry it in. The humanoids are unlikely to be abroad at night."

"Isn't there a chance that there might be water nearer here?"

"An unlikely probability in view of the barrenness of the landscape."

Consciousness was returning to Kirk and he gradually became aware of the voices of Spock and McCoy. He turned his head towards the sound and slowly opened his eyes, trying to focus on them standing near him. The movement forced an involuntary groan out of him, and his head resumed its pounding. McCoy, hearing the sound, came quickly to him and knelt at his side.

"Jim..."

"I know, I must lie still," Kirk cut in, managing a small smile.

"Yes, you must, and be sure you do. How do you feel?"

"Better, Bones. I just wish my head would stop beating like a drum. For once I wish you had some of those green pills on you."

"I'll remind you of that next time you complain about them. Try and get some sleep and the pain should ease off."

"Easier said than done."

"Well, just lie there. Close your eyes and try to relax."

Kirk did as he was told and he soon drifted off to sleep. McCoy, who had been watching him, saw his even breathing and was satisfied.

Kirk woke up a few hours later feeling slightly better; at least the pounding in his head had receded to a dull ache. He looked round at the barren landscape and saw McCoy and Spock in the distance, standing with their backs to him. He decided to join them. He eased himself into a sitting position, wincing in pain. Raising his hand to the source, he gently felt the long gash on the side of his head. It was decidedly tender. He sat still for a minute until the pain eased off and then pulled himself to his feet with the aid of a large boulder.

Once on his feet he was overcome by an attack of dizziness and leaned on the rock, shaking. Kirk was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea, but he didn't want to be a handicap to the others. He must prove to them that he was all right now.

After a few moments the dizziness eased and he was able to stand unsupported. He made his way slowly and unsteadily to where McCoy and Spock were standing. He felt weak and dizzy but he was determined to make it.

McCoy heard the footsteps and turned, horrified to see Kirk on his feet. He took the Captain's arm and guided him to a rock, where Kirk sat down, thankful for the rest.

McCoy was angry. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

"I felt better, Bones."

"Well, if you don't take it easy, you won't be feeling better much longer. How's the head?"

"Not too bad, it just aches a bit," Kirk said, deciding to change the subject. "Spock, what is the situation at the moment?"

"My tricorder readings indicate that the aliens have left the river and returned to the village. Since we have no water I suggest we make our way back to the river when darkness falls."

"Have you found any food?"

"Negative, sir. There seems to be no vegetation or animal life on this side of the river. The natives seem to get their food from the other side of the river where the land is more fertile."

"How long have we got till the Enterprise is due back?"

"Thirty six point nine hours, sir."

"Well, I guess we'll have to do without food till then. I don't want to risk crossing the river and running into any of the aliens. That shouldn't be any problem, should it, Bones?"

"No, we can go for quite a while without food, so long as we've got a good supply of water."

Kirk nodded, regretted the motion, then turned to Spock. "Contact Chekov and Freeman and tell them to report back here, Spock. As soon as it is dark we'll head for the river."

Spock took out his communicator, flipped it open and contacted Chekov. Meanwhile, McCoy took charge of Kirk.

"Come on and sit under the shade of this rock, you'll be more comfortable. Get some more rest till it's time to go."

Kirk allowed McCoy to lead him to the rock; he hadn't the strength to argue. He sat in the shade and leaned back against the rock, thankful for somewhere to rest his aching head. Eventually he closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

When Kirk woke again it was getting dark. He felt very thirsty. He sat up and winced as his head resumed its aching - would it never stop?

McCoy had seen him move and came over to him. "How do you feel now, Jim?"

"I'm fine, Bones. Where's Spock?"

"He's just checking with his tricorder to make sure there's no-one close. Are you sure you feel fit enough to walk back to the river? It's pretty rough going."

"Don't worry so much, Bones. I'm fine."

Spock arrived with Chekov and Freeman. He came straight to Kirk. "There is no-one within a three mile radius, sir."

"All right, Spock. It's time we got on our way."

Kirk got to his feet carefully, aware that all eyes were on him. He had to stand still for a moment, fighting down waves of dizziness and nausea. He kept a straight face, determined not to let the others see how weak he was. This time, with the help of the darkness, he was successful, although McCoy wasn't completely convinced. After a few moments Kirk felt slightly better and called to Spock.

"Which way, Spock?"

"This way, Captain. If you prefer, I'll lead the way."

"Lead on."

Spock led the way slowly back towards the river. He deliberately walked slowly for Kirk's sake, but even at this pace the Captain was finding the going rather rough. He was getting used to the continuous ache in his head but the dizziness was hard to cope with. He couldn't understand why it was getting so warm. On most planets the temperature dropped at night, but here it seemed to be getting warmer. He began to feel the sweat running down his back. He forced himself to concentrate on just putting one foot in front of the other.

After what seemed an interminable time to Kirk, Spock stopped. "The river is just ahead of us, Captain."

Kirk's throat was too dry for him to answer; he just felt his way to the river bank, knelt down and took a long drink of the ice cold water. After he had drunk his fill he could not resist ducking his head into the river, the cold water felt so cooling on his hot, sweaty face and it eased his aching head. He held his head under as long as he could and then took another long drink. After this he felt a little fresher and climbed unsteadily to his feet. He could just make out McCoy's form approaching him out of the darkness.

"What do we do now, Jim?" McCoy asked.

Although Kirk felt slightly better he didn't think he could walk any further. It was all he could do now to stand on his feet.

"We'll stay close to the river and try to get some sleep. We can take turns at keeping watch. If the natives decide to come back we'll move inland tomorrow, if not we'll stay here. We want to be here when the Enterprise returns. We'd better work out a watch rota, Spock."

"You're not to stand a watch, Jim," McCoy intervened. "You need all the sleep you can get."

"Agreed, Doctor," said Spock before Kirk could get a word in. "Four of us will be enough to stand watches, you can take the last one."

"That's fine with me, Spock. I think there's a place close to those rocks where we might be comfortable enough to get some sleep. Are you coming, Jim?"

Kirk went with McCoy over to the rocks, leaving Spock to arrange the night watches. He found a clear space on the ground where he was able to lie down and at least be partially comfortable. By the time McCoy came over to him he was asleep, so McCoy left him in peace.

Kirk woke up some time later shivering with the cold and with his head aching intolerably. He rolled himself into a ball trying to get warm, but it was no use. He couldn't stop shaking. He tried to get back to sleep but his head

throbbed and he ached all over. The night passed slowly and he began to wonder if morning would ever come. He was vaguely aware of Spock's voice as the Vulcan woke McCoy to stand his watch.

McCoy woke as soon as he was called. It was still dark and wouldn't be light for a couple of hours yet. Spock lay down after telling McCoy to waken everyone as soon as it began to get light.

McCoy sat on a rock for a while, trying to make out detail in the blackness. He felt uneasy; something was wrong. Suddenly he heard a moan and quickly going to the source of the sound he found Kirk, shivering and huddled on the ground, McCoy knelt beside him and laid a hand on Kirk's brow. It was burning hot.

Kirk, feeling the Doctor's touch, opened his eyes, trying to make out the form in the inky blackness.

"Bon-es..." He croaked.

"Take it easy, Jim," McCoy said gently. "Don't try to speak." McCoy felt for his pulse.

"So...so...cold," Kirk stuttered and then broke into a spasm of coughing. It passed quickly but left him gasping with pain and holding his chest. He shivered uncontrollably.

Spock, awakened by the sound of Kirk's coughing, joined McCoy. He didn't need to ask what was wrong, he could see for himself.

"Spock, we've got to find a way to keep Jim warm. But we've got nothing to cover him with," McCoy said, trying to think of an answer. He suddenly had an idea. "Give me a hand to get these wet clothes off him."

Together they took off Kirk's clothes, which had been soaked by his sweat. McCoy then took off his own clothes and they put them on Kirk. He called Chekov and told him to lie down beside the Captain and hold him close; he then lay down on the other side and they tried to keep Kirk warm with the heat of their bodies.

Meanwhile, Spock and Freeman crossed the river at a narrow spot and made their way to the village that Spock had picked up on his tricorder. They sneaked in and managed to grab some blankets. They took as many as they could carry and hurried back to the river. They just made it as the sun came up.

McCoy heard them coming and got to his feet. Seeing the blankets, he and Chekov again stripped off the Captain's clothing, once more soaked with his sweat. The warmth of their bodies had helped, but Kirk was in a bad way. The coughing spells had become frequent, and he was finding breathing painful and difficult. He was still shivering and the sweat poured off him; he was burning with fever.

They quickly wrapped him in blankets and made him as comfortable as possible. Freeman had found a crude cup so McCoy filled it with water and gave Kirk a drink. Kirk took a couple of mouthfuls but then gagged on it and broke into a spasm of coughing. It was a severe one and he was in great pain. McCoy put an arm under his shoulders and lifted him slightly, trying to help.

"Easy, Jim." Meaningless words, the Doctor knew even as he spoke them. But he was helpless to do anything but try and calm his friend.

Gradually the spasm passed; exhausted by it, and wracked with pain, Kirk lay back on McCoy's arm, his face white against the rough homespun blanket. Gently the Doctor eased him to the ground again, tucking the blanket around, then straightened up.

A chilly wind had sprung up and onimous dark clouds were hurrying across the sky. McCoy felt a sudden spot of rain on his cheek and glanced anxiously at his patient. Despite the blankets, Kirk was shuddering as if with cold; and from time to time a faint moan escaped him. He was clearly only semi-conscious now.

"Spock," the Doctor said in an undertone, as if afraid that Kirk might

overhear him. "It won't do. We've got to find a shelter for him somehow - you can see that for yourself."

"Agreed, Doctor." Spock's expression was as near concern as was possible for him. "But this empty hillside does not look promising. There is insufficient vegetation even to cover the Captain adequately."

Chekov, discreetly not listening, was busy drawing the blankets closer around the Captain; they had been disturbed by Kirk's feverish movements and the light drizzle was beginning to sprinkle his head and shoulders. But Freeman, aware of his own partial responsibility for the Captain's condition, had been listening anxiously and now broke in.

"Mr. Spock! Sir! That ruined hut we passed at the edge of the village, couldn't we take the Captain there? It looked as if nobody ever uses it now."

"Thank you, Ensign." Spock's tone was a dismissal and Freeman retreated to help Chekov. The rain was coming down heavily now and a wind had sprung up; it was blowing the rain across the landscape in sheets. Chekov and Freeman sat with their backs to the wind, trying to shelter Kirk as best they could from the driving rain.

The First Officer moved away, going towards the river, tricorder swinging thoughtfully. McCoy followed him urgently.

"Well, Spock, what about it?"

"The village is three miles from here and the risk of encountering the natives is very great; the non-interference directive, as you know..."

McCoy opened his mouth to say, "Blast the non-interference directive!" but changed his mind. They were all bound by their oaths to uphold it, and cursing it wouldn't help. Instead he said, with as much calmness as he could, "It's Jim's life we're talking about, Spock. Another day out here, without food, warmth or shelter from this rain will kill him. He won't stand a chance."

Spock had been staring at his tricorder screen as if the answers were written there, but at this unaccustomed quietness in the Doctor's tone he lifted his head and glanced back towards the others. Kirk was lying huddled in blankets on the wet ground; Chekov and Freeman were sitting anxiously beside him, trying to shelter him a bit. Spock moved back towards them, with McCoy at his heels.

"Mr. Freeman - take your tricorder and scout ahead of us to the point where we crossed the river this morning. Mr. Chekov, give me a hand with the Captain."

McCoy let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and hurried forward to help.

The rain was coming down even harder now and the going underfoot was treacherous. Spock was handicapped, carrying the unconscious Captain in his arms; it took them a while to reach the crossing place.

Freeman was waiting for them when they arrived, a worried look on his face. The river had risen since they'd last crossed, and it was flowing very fast. Crossing it wasn't going to be easy.

"Well, Spock, what do we do?" McCoy asked rather dejectedly.

Spock thought for a moment and then answered. "You say that the Captain will die if we don't get him to a shelter. It will not be easy getting across this river - but there is shelter on the other side. Logically, then, if we are not going to let Jim die, we must get across the river."

McCoy glanced sharply at the Vulcan. Spock's use of the Captain's first name indicated his worry and concern far more than his impassive face ever could. McCoy understood how close Kirk and Spock were, that very special relationship that they had between them - he probably understood it even better than they did. It wasn't a relationship you could describe with mere words, there was an empathy

between them; they were like two twins, but even closer.

Spock decided that the safest way to get Kirk across the river was for him to carry the Captain across on his shoulders. They wrapped Kirk tightly in a blanket to try and keep him dry and Chekov helped Spock to hoist him onto his shoulders.

They started to wade across the raging river, Freeman taking the lead followed by Spock with Kirk, McCoy and Chekov bringing up the rear. They were nearing the other side when McCoy looked upstream and was horrified to see a tree being swept down straight towards Spock. He yelled a warning, but it was too late. Spock was knocked from his feet and he and Kirk were carried off down the river. Spock managed to grab hold of Kirk and started swimming strongly towards the shore. Eventually he got close to the bank and managed to grab an overhanging branch.

The sudden immersion into the cold water brought Kirk back to consciousness. He found himself choking and struggling, trying to get his head above water, but he couldn't get his arms free. They seemed to be tied to his sides. Not understanding what was happening he panicked, swallowing even more water. Suddenly he felt himself grabbed and pulled up till his head was clear of the water. He couldn't make out who had grabbed him but he dimly realised they were in a river and making for the bank. After a while they stopped moving and Kirk realised that they must have reached the bank. He felt the water sweeping past him, trying to drag him out of the grip of his rescuer. Kirk started to struggle again, trying to free his arms, but all he succeeded in doing was to swallow more water. He choked on it and broke into a fit of coughing, fighting for breath. The pain across his chest was like a band of fire. Suddenly he heard a familiar voice speaking to him.

"Don't struggle, Jim. Help will be here soon."

Realising that it was Spock who held him, Kirk tried to relax. The fit of coughing passed and he lay in the water as still as he could, trusting in Spock completely.

McCoy had watched horrified as Spock and Kirk were swept down the river and out of sight round a bend. He got ashore as quickly as he could and with Chekov and Freeman he headed along the bank of the river, fearing the worst. They had almost given up hope when, ahead of them, they saw Spock holding onto a branch with one hand and hanging onto Kirk with the other. They ran to the edge of the river bank, McCoy shouting to Spock to let him know they were coming.

Kirk had lost track of time. The cold was creeping over him like a thick blanket and he was letting it do so. He knew that he should try to fight it but he hadn't the strength left. The warm darkness was enveloping him, a welcome release from the pain. Just before he lost consciousness, Kirk thought he heard McCoy's voice.

Freeman and Chekov managed to reach Spock and pull him nearer the shore. Then they got hold of Kirk and dragged him up onto the bank. They then helped Spock out of the water and Freeman handed him a blanket. Spock was grateful for it as he was shivering from the cold and wet.

McCoy quickly checked Kirk and realised that the Captain was barely breathing. He immediately started to give him artificial respiration. For a while there was no reaction, then Kirk started choking and coughed up a fair amount of water. McCoy picked up a blanket and began to rub Kirk down and to massage him, trying to restore his circulation. Eventually Kirk began to stir. He slowly opened his eyes and looked up at McCoy, trying to get him in focus.

McCoy smiled down at him. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Jim." McCoy hoped he sounded more cheerful than he felt.

Kirk struggled to speak but broke into another spasm of coughing, the pain slicing like a knife through his chest. When the bout of coughing passed he was totally exhausted by it and slipped back into the welcome escape of unconsciousness.

McCoy frowned and wrapped Kirk in the blankets, which were rather wet now. Then he went over to Spock. "How are you feeling, Spock?"

"I've felt warmer, Doctor. I suggest we start making our way to the hut and get the Captain in out of this rain."

McCoy agreed with this completely, so they started out towards the village. Chekov and Freeman carried Kirk between them this time, and Spock led the way, a blanket round his shoulders. McCoy brought up the rear. They had a good way to go as they had to make their way back up the river first, and it was mid-afternoon by the time they reached the hut. It was still raining hard and the wind was very strong.

Making sure that the hut was still empty, Chekov and Freeman carried Kirk into it and laid him gently on the floor. The trampled straw underfoot and the smell suggested that it had served as some sort of byre, but it was at least fairly wind and water proof inside. Their greatest worry, that of being overheard, was quisted to some extent; the nearest house was some distance away, and the strong wind was blowing towards them, drowning the sound of the Captain's fevered mutterings even inside the hut.

McCoy, assisted by Chekov, again stripped off the Captain's shirt and the rest of his clothes as they were all soaking wet. McCoy had managed to keep a couple of the blankets dry by wrapping them in another one, so he wrapped these around Kirk.

Despite the protection of the blankets and the woven hut walls, Kirk was shivering with cold and fever. His breathing came in racking gasps interspersed with painfully dry coughing, his face flushed with the effort.

The Doctor, checking his pulse once more, was concerned to find it very weak and irregular. Looking up, his eyes met Spock's in the gloom, and he shook his head slightly.

"He needs warmth, liquids, drugs - everything we can't give him here. There's nothing more I can do for him without proper medical facilities."

"We can get water from the river again," suggested Spock.

"That's not - " McCoy began, but broke off, startled, as the grey light from the doorway was suddenly blocked off. He and Freeman just had time to drag Kirk clear before the hut was invaded by two huge shaggy beasts, built something on the lines of Highland cattle, but standing almost six feet at the shoulder. Heads swinging, eyes rolling in mild astonishment at finding the shelter already occupied, they advanced into the centre of the open space and stood, their breath warming the chilly air. Evidently satisfied, they subsided with heavy grunts to the ground, their damp, shaggy black coats flapping around them.

"That's great," muttered McCoy, though not so loudly as to alarm them - he just didn't know their temper and wasn't wanting to take chances. "And just where are we supposed to sit?" For much of the floor-space was now filled by the sprawling creatures, and most of the rest by Kirk.

"What...what are they?" asked Chekov stupidly; he still hadn't recovered from the shock of their sudden appearance.

"Domestic animals, almost certainly..." Spock began, but he was interrupted by a small voice.

"Simba and Bonni," the small voice cut in.

Startled, their heads whipped round towards the doorway. Framed in it against the grey light was a humanoid - a child, judging by Earth standards. A little girl, perhaps three years old, with long black hair.

"Who are you? Why are you here? Are you bad men?" It was a child, evidently - but how unafraid she was! McCoy took it upon himself to answer.

"We're strangers. From a distant place. We're just sheltering here from

the rain. We mean no harm to your people."

Did she understand? Above all, she mustn't be frightened into calling for help. Curiosity and suspicion were in her face as she stood poised for flight. McCoy went on desperately. "We're good people, not bad men! And our Captain is hurt..."

Spock glanced at him; if the child reported this information there could be trouble ahead.

"Captain?" she asked in a puzzled voice. The word was clearly unfamiliar to her.

"Our - leader, Chieftain," supplied Chekov helpfully.

"Him," said the girl excitedly, pointing to Spock.

"No," replied Spock gravely. "This is our Leader." He drew aside to show her Kirk, huddled in his blankets on the floor.

The girl came closer, picking her way among the feet of the beasts, obviously unconcerned by their presence.

"He is - sick? My mother was sick last Spring. We gave her lana' cala. She is well now."

"Lana' cala?" queried Spock.

"You know," she said, with an impatient stamp. "From the garanas." The faces around her were still puzzled. "Like these. Simba and Bonni. Bonni has lana' cala still, because she has a baby, but Simba does not have any."

"Milk!" exclaimed McCoy, the light suddenly breaking. Then, with growing excitement, "Can you...er...how do you get lana' cala? May we have some?" But the child had lost interest and was looking at Kirk now.

"He does not have the right ears, but his hair is a funny colour - like gold! Is that why he is your King?"

"Never mind that now," said McCoy impatiently. "The lana' cala. Have you seen anyone getting it from the garanas? How is it done?"

The child merely looked bewildered and a little frightened at the Doctor's abrupt tone.

"I don't understand," she said, backing away slightly.

"Maybe I could try," volunteered Freeman diffidently. "If it's anything like milking a cow - I was raised on a farm and I used to be a good hand at it."

At Spock's nod he cautiously approached the nearest beast, clutching the cup in one hand. With a snuffle it rose to its feet and stood blowing gently, eyeing his advances dubiously. Freeman ran his empty hand along its side, but it started nervously from his touch.

"Watch out for its feet," warned Chekov. "The Captain's not far away from it."

"What are you doing?" asked the child, puzzled.

"We need lana' cala - for the King," explained Spock.

"Oh, that. Give me the cup and I will show you. My father taught me," said the child proudly, and took the cup from Freeman's eager hand. As she ducked down beside the huge beast for a few moments her voice was muffled.

"Haven't you got any garanas?" she asked. Then straightening, she held out the cup. "Here you are." It was brimming with lana' cala - warm, new milk.

Carefully McCoy took it from her, fearful of spilling any, and carried it across to Kirk. With Chekov's help, he propped the Captain up, steadying him against one arm and holding the cup close to his lips.

"C'mon, Jim."

Kirk opened glazed eyes, looking vaguely at the cup. "Wha...?" he croaked.

"Lana' cala. Try it - Doctor's orders."

Wearily, Kirk closed his eyes again. Understanding was too much effort.

"Jim!" The voice persisted. A smell, vaguely familiar, was coming to him now, and the rim of a cup was pressing against his lips, tilting - not water again, this was warm. Reluctantly he sipped, then sipped again as the soothing warm milk reached his parched mouth and dry throat. He tried to gulp it and choked, coughing violently. McCoy drew the cup back and waited, concerned, till the fit of coughing passed. Then he brought the cup to Kirk's lips again.

"Take it slowly, Jim. Slowly - that's the way."

The cup was emptied, filled again by the wondering child, then drained once more. Satisfied, Kirk sank back against McCoy's arm.

"Wish all your remedies were more like that, Bones," he whispered, hoarsely, managing a glimmer of a smile. "That was..." the sentence finished in a sigh. The Captain was asleep.

McCoy lowered him gently to the ground, made him comfortable, and then stood up. "Thank you, Miss...?"

"My name is Ara."

"Thank you, Ara. You have helped him get well. We are very grateful."

"Yes, he will be well soon. Like my mother." As if this was a reminder, Ara wandered towards the door. "It has stopped raining. I shall go home and tell her..."

"Why don't you stay here a while and talk to us?" intervened McCoy hastily. "We'd like to hear about your family."

Freeman approached the little girl. "Could you show me how to get the lana' cala from Bonni?"

"Yes," said Ara proudly. "Watch how I do it."

Freeman watched carefully and then had a go himself. Since he was used to milking a cow he soon got the knack. He tried a cup and found it very pleasant and warming, so he offered it around to the others. They were all feeling the cold and the milk warmed them up.

The afternoon wore away. Ara, alternately chattering about herself, her family and her pets, and listening to the stories spun by her new friends, seemed happy enough, but for the Enterprise party it seemed to last an eternity. Every sound outside seemed to be the approach of one of the humanoids from the village and imminent discovery. And there was the problem of Ara - how long before she was missed? Dared they let her go back and lead others to them? Even if she promised to say nothing, there was little hope they could depend on her, she was so young. But what alternative was there?

McCoy chewed these ideas over as he sat beside Kirk, holding a damp cloth on Kirk's hot forehead. Kirk was delirious and muttering unintelligibly. Sweat was dripping off him. McCoy asked Freeman to get another cup of milk and he then tried to get Kirk to drink some of it. Supporting the Captain he held the cup to his lips.

"Jim, try some more milk."

Kirk was only semi-conscious but when he smelt the warm milk he instinctively sipped it. McCoy made sure he didn't take it too fast. When the cup was empty McCoy gently laid Kirk down and pulled the blankets up closer round him. He frowned as he looked down at his friend, wishing there was more he could do. Then he resumed his seat beside the Captain, and placed the damp cloth on his forehead; he looked over at Ara.

Spock had her on his knee at the moment, telling her some tale of Vulcan's legendary past, carefully adapted for his present audience. Ara sat wrapt, asking questions, darting from idea to idea, trying to guess how the story would end. In spite of his worry, McCoy couldn't help smiling at the sight of Spock in this unusual role, almost relaxed for once, evidently living his own childhood again. The words couldn't be heard over here on the other side of the hut, for the wind was still blowing strongly, but McCoy's smile spread to a grin as he saw Chekov leaning closer, anxious not to miss anything. The story would to its conclusion and Spock sat silent, Ara's head against his shoulder. In the sudden hush, Chekov's voice came clearly.

"But what happened to...?"

With a wave, Spock quietened him, indicating the child in his lap. Ara was asleep.

Carefully, so as not to waken her, Spock passed her across to Freeman and rose, stretching himself, then joined McCoy.

McCoy looked sideways at him, and said banteringly, "Vulcan lost a good nursemaid when you joined Starfleet, Spock." But Spock chose to ignore this one.

"How is the Captain, Doctor?"

McCoy's face lost its grin and he became suddenly serious. "His fever's coming to a peak. We'll know one way or the other soon, Spock."

Spock looked down at Kirk's fever flushed face. Only he knew what thoughts were going through his mind; McCoy could read nothing on that poker straight face.

Suddenly, they were both startled by a distant voice shouting.

"Ara! Ara!"

Ara woke abruptly, looked round in sleepy bewilderment, smiled up at Freeman, then padded across to Spock and the others.

"I must go. Thank you for the story, sir," she said politely, as if making her goodbyes at a party. She looked down at the unconscious Captain. "Your King will soon be well. The lana' cala will cure him, as it did my mother."

"Thank you, Ara," said McCoy. "Would you do something else for us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you not tell about us being here for a while? Of course," he added hastily, seeing her eyes widening, "you shouldn't tell lies if they ask you, but if they don't ask you..."

"Oh, they won't," said the child confidently. "They never do."

"Thank you, Ara. Good night."

"Goodnight, sir." A pause, then as she looked down at Kirk again, "His ears aren't like his," she said, indicating Spock. "Like in the stories. But his hair is gold, isn't it?" Then she was gone, ducking out into the darkness.

Outside, a scolding voice said, "Ara, where have you been? It's long past your bedtime."

The men held their breath for a moment.

"Only inside the old hut with Bonni and Simba." The footsteps died away and McCoy let out a sigh of relief.

"Bon-es," a voice suddenly croaked and McCoy looked down at Kirk in surprise. Kirk's eyes were open and his face had lost the flushed look. He was pale and drawn. McCoy quickly knelt beside him.

"Easy, Jim. Don't try to talk." McCoy put his arm under Kirk's shoulders

and eased him into a sitting position. He took the cup of warm milk that Freeman handed him and let Kirk sip it slowly. Kirk drained the cup, then his eyes closed and he became a dead weight on McCoy's arm. McCoy took a quick check of his pulse, then, reasonably satisfied, wrapped the blankets closely round the Captain, making him as comfortable as possible. He looked up as Spock came across to him.

"How is he, Doctor?"

"Well, the fever's broken, his pulse is stronger, and he's breathing easier. He's sleeping now and that's the best thing for him."

Spock nodded, then said, "We had all better try and get some sleep. The Enterprise will not be back until morning. We will stand the same watches as last night."

"No, Spock," McCoy interrupted. "I'd rather stay awake and keep an eye on Jim. You three can get some sleep."

Spock did not argue - he felt it would indeed be better if McCoy sat up with Kirk, so he, Chekov and Freeman lay down when they could and were soon asleep.

The night passed slowly and McCoy kept his lonely vigil beside Kirk. The Captain slept peacefully, however, and as the hours passed McCoy's spirits rose.

Dawn was just breaking when McCoy was startled by the bleeping of one of the communicators. He took it out and flipped it open, to hear -

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk." It was Scotty's voice.

Spock joined McCoy and took the communicator from him. "Enterprise, this is Spock. Lock on to my signal and prepare to beam up five. Have a medical team in the transporter room; we have a casualty."

"Affirmative, Mr. Spock. Standing by."

McCoy and Spock lifted Kirk and held him supported between them. They were joined by Chekov and Freeman. Spock spoke into the communicator.

"Energise."

The landing party dematerialised and the garanas looked slightly startled as the men vanished. Then the hut was empty, except for the two animals, the blankets, and the crude cup.

Later that morning, at breakfast, Ara's mother was complaining. "I don't know where those blankets have got to. I'm sure I left them in the back room."

"I know where they are," Ara said importantly. "The Good People took them. One of them had pointed ears - just like in the stories. They were for the King - he was sick. But he didn't have pointed ears."

"What on earth are you talking about?" exclaimed her mother.

"In the old hut, yesterday, there were five of them. But I expect they've gone now."

Ara's father smiled indulgently, but her mother looked a little alarmed.

"Kenor, you don't suppose... There have been bad men around recently."

"If it makes you happy, we'll go and look."

The hut was quite empty, of course - although the blankets were there. Kenor smiled at Ara. "'Fraid they've flown away, eh, Ara?"

"Yes. But he did have gold hair," said Ara thoughtfully.

Unbeknown to Ara, her golden-haired King was, at that precise moment, regaining consciousness in the sickbay of a Starship, which was already a couple

of light years from her planet and speeding further away every second.

Kirk gradually became aware of his surroundings and of McCoy's voice.

"He's going to be very weak for a while and it'll be two or three weeks before he's fit for duty, but we've a lot to thank Ara for, that milk saved his life. Without it he would never have survived long enough for us to get him back on board."

"She was an interesting child," agreed Spock.

"Ara?" asked Kirk hoarsely.

Both Spock and McCoy spun round at the sound of Kirk's voice and went to him. "How are you feeling, Jim?" asked McCoy.

"A bit like someone's been using me for a punch bag. Who is Ara?"

"A very nice little girl who saved your life. Don't you remember anything?"

"Everything's rather hazy...like a dream." Kirk's voice began to sound strained. "I can't..."

"Easy, Jim. Don't try to force it." McCoy laid a hand gently on Kirk's arm and smiled down at him. "You were pretty sick, it's not surprising that you don't remember."

"Ara was one of the natives, Captain," supplied Spock. "I made an error in thinking we would remain undisturbed in the hut."

"Look, if anyone's to blame, I am..." out in McCoy.

"The responsibility..."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Kirk with an effort, "there's no point in arguing about it now. The question is, how much damage was done? Does anyone else know about us?"

"I think it unlikely, Captain. The girl was very young and she had no idea who we really were."

"Fine. What's happening now?"

"We are on course for Starbase 11, sir. We will be there in eleven point five six days."

Kirk was becoming drowsy again. His eyes were getting heavy and he was having a job to keep them open. McCoy saw this.

"That's enough talking for now, Jim. You need to get some rest. If you behave and so as you're told, I might even let you up in time to go on shore leave."

Kirk felt that he ought to answer that but he just didn't have the energy. His eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep.

McCoy looked down at the sleeping figure and smiled. "He'll be fine, Spock."

Spock nodded and left silently, to get on with the business of running the ship.

THE GREATEST GIFT by Valerie Piacentini

It has been said that the greatest gift a man can show is to give his life for his friends. That is not so - there is a greater gift. I know; once, it was given to me.

* * *

It was the President's reception on Cornal V. There were Ambassadors from a dozen planets, Cornelian dignitaries, elegant men, beautiful women. Jim and I represented Starfleet - Spock, engrossed as usual in some research, had elected to remain on the Enterprise.

I was talking to the wife of the Terran Ambassador when the bomb was thrown. Why? I never knew. Rebels, freedom-fighters, terrorists - take your pick. Whatever the motive, the result was horrifying.

Over the bodies of the dead and dying I somehow scrambled towards the yellow-clad figure; Jim had been nearer the blast than I - could he still be alive? I could hear the rescue parties already at work, but they would take some time yet to reach him; fire had taken hold, and trapped by a fallen beam he lay perilously close to the flames. Even as I reached him his clothes caught alight, and I had to smother the flames with my bare hands before I could raise the beam and move him clear.

With Jim in my arms I staggered towards the door; shocked faces turned to me, and someone gently took him from me. He was alive - I registered that fact as for the first time I became aware of the pain from my badly-burned hands. I remember trying to say something about the Enterprise just as a hypo hissed against my shoulder, and oblivion claimed me.

* * *

I recovered consciousness in my quarters on board the Enterprise. I was alone. It was only when I tried to sit up in bed that I realised that my hands were heavily bandaged, and I remembered what had happened. Jim! I must get to him - he would need me. With some difficulty I got to my feet; after a few moments the dizziness passed, and I began to dress, my movements unusually clumsy. As I pulled on my boots Nurse Chapel came in; she would have protested but my glare silenced her.

"How is the Captain?" I enquired.

She looked away. "He's in sickbay, sir. You should be resting; Dr. M'Benga said..."

"I'm the Chief Medical Officer on this ship, not M'Benga," I growled, brushing past her; she followed as I headed for sickbay.

M'Benga was leaning over Jim; Spock stood at his shoulder, as he had so often stood at mine. From my vantage point I could see his face clearly - so that was how he looked at such times; usually I was too occupied to notice. As he became aware of my presence, the cold Vulcan mask closed again over his face.

M'Benga straightened, and I saw the readings over the bed.

"Your report, Doctor?" I asked crisply. Like Nurse Chapel, he knew better than to argue, and handed me his notes. It was... very bad. The burns were superficial, but several bomb splinters had penetrated Jim's body. One lay very close to his heart - if it moved even a fraction, and it easily could, it would kill him.

"Prepare for immediate surgery," I ordered.

M'Benga shook his head. "I can't risk it, Dr. McCoy; I don't have the experience. I could kill him."

I glanced at Spock. "How long to the nearest Starbase?"

"Four days." His eyes didn't move from Jim's face.

Four days! To wait four hours would be a risk. "We've got to try," I told M'Benga. "He doesn't have much time - you'll have to operate. I'll supervise, guide you as best I can."

He nodded slightly. "If you think it essential, Doctor, but the chance of success is slight."

"A slight chance is better than no chance at all. I'll be in my office - call me when you're ready."

* * *

Seated at my desk, I stared down at my useless hands, knowing with bitterness that I had the skill to save my friend's life, yet could not do so. The door to my office opened and closed. Gradually I became aware of someone standing patiently, waiting; I raised my head to meet Spock's dark eyes.

"I must speak with you, Doctor."

I motioned him to a chair. "Well?"

"I must... make a decision; there are... several questions I must ask."

"Go on."

"Without an operation, the Captain will die?"

"Yes, and soon. The splinter could move at any time."

"Dr. M'Benga has little chance of success?"

I sighed wearily; he always had to have things explained in precise detail. Then I relented - after all, he had allowed Jim to come closer to understanding him than anyone else, and if he thought of him as a friend, he would naturally be concerned.

"That's true," I answered. "He has insufficient experience, and the surgery involved is extremely delicate. It's not much of a choice, Spock; the operation will probably kill him, but he'll certainly die without it."

"You could perform the operation successfully?"

"I believe so - I've done similar before. He'd have a better chance, certainly... but I can't operate like this."

"I see."

He sat in silence for what seemed like a long time, then raised his head and met my eyes steadily. "Suppose..." Uncharacteristically, he hesitated, then went on, "Suppose it were possible for you to operate?"

"Don't be a fool, Spock!" I said sharply. "You must know I'd give..."

"There is a way," he said slowly, "if you can trust me completely."

"How do you mean?"

"There is a form of the mind meld, a total fusion of personalities. I can suppress my own mind, and allow you to control my body. With your skill directing my hands, you can operate on the Captain. You may find the closeness of the fusion... disturbing, but it will work."

I stared at him in disbelief. Jim and Spock had often linked in the past, but I knew the Vulcan disliked doing so with anyone else; and not even with Jim had he attempted to do as he now proposed, allowing me total control.

"Do you trust me so much?" I asked huskily.

The dark eyes held mine unswervingly. "I do," he said quietly. "We have said... many things in the past, Doctor... but you must know... not even for Jim's sake could I allow this link to anyone else."

I could not speak, only reached out to him; he took my hand gently.

"There is no time to waste," he reminded me.

"What must I do?"

"I will establish the initial link first. Lie down on the couch, please."

I obeyed, and he sat beside me, his fingers touching my face. Despite my utter confidence in him, for a moment an instinctive fear overwhelmed me, and I drew back. He waited patiently.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I understand. Relax, and trust me...trust me..."

This time I remained unmoving as his thoughts touched my mind; I would never have Jim's easy familiarity with the meld, but I knew I could trust Spock's integrity completely. As the link formed and strengthened, I was aware only of his eyes, holding mine so that I could not look away. His thought reached me clearly.

"The link is formed, Doctor; are you prepared for the fusion?"

"Yes. What happens now?"

"I must submerge me personality, and allow you to take over. I would suggest that you give yourself a little time to become used to controlling my body before you begin the operation - you will find that my reactions are faster than yours, and it may confuse you at first. When you have finished, return here; you will have to initiate the separation, as I will be unable to. Reach for the mind link as you have seen me do, and call me with all your concentration. Do not be afraid, Doctor. Trust me, and all will be well."

"I do trust you, Spock. I'm...ready now."

His mind moved again, and darkness descended on me; when sight returned, I was looking down at my own body, lying on the couch as though asleep.

It was a...very strange sensation. My eyesight seemed much sharper than normal, and there was a subtle...difference in my perception of colour. I stood up rather shakily, and moved around the room. As the minutes passed, I grew more comfortable in this unfamiliar body; co-ordination improved, and I became more accustomed to my heightened senses. I remember - curiously - thinking how cold it seemed, and realising that this was how the normal temperature of the ship must feel to Spock.

When I was sure of my control, I entered sickbay, where M'Benga and Nurse Chapel were preparing for surgery; they stared at me in surprise.

"Mr. Spock!" exclaimed M'Benga. "I think you'd better wait outside, sir."

"It's not Spock," I told them, conscious of a momentary amusement at their puzzled expressions. "It's McCoy. I've linked with Mr. Spock - I'll operate on the Captain myself. Finish the preparations, please - we have no time to waste."

I passed the next few minutes examining the instruments I intended to use; to my relief, my - Spock's - hands manipulated the delicate equipment with the deftness I had acquired through long familiarity.

When all was ready I approached the bed. Now I must forget that the man who lay there was my friend; for the next few hours he could only be an anonymous patient whose life depended on my skill - to think of him as Jim would only impair my concentration. At the same time I must try to forget that I stood within an alien body; I must have confidence in myself, in my abilities - yet surely no surgeon had ever operated under such strange circumstances. I drew a deep breath, and signalled to M'Benga.

"Ready, Doctor."

* * *

Some remote corner of my mind registered the passing of time as I worked steadily on. It was incredibly delicate surgery I must perform - the splinters

lay very close to the main artery, and there was no room for error. Yet I must also work swiftly - Jim weakened rapidly under the strain of the long hours of surgery; indeed, at one point his heart stopped beating, but life-support sustained him until I could continue. Spock's physical strength kept me on my feet, with none of the fatigue I would normally have expected, and his keen sight and quick reflexes were invaluable. The mental strain was intense, however; I could not quite forget the curious circumstances under which I worked.

At last I closed the incision in Jim's chest, and stepped back; all that my skill could do for him had been done. Now everything depended on his own will to live. I could safely leave him to M'Benga now, and went to clean up, becoming aware of a numbing exhaustion that always seems to overtake me at such times - perhaps it's only the relaxation of tension.

It was while I was washing that I caught sight of myself in the mirror, and paused to peer closely at my reflection. Staring into the dark eyes that looked back at me, I wondered then how it must be to wear this face, to walk among Humans so clearly marked as an alien. How did he meet so calmly the sidelong glances, the whispered comments that were meant to be overheard? I had teased him often in the past, but we both knew how little substance there was in my barbed comments - others, I knew, judged him more harshly.

I felt a sudden surge of anger on Spock's behalf. To save Jim he had been willing to violate his deepest instincts, reveal his carefully hidden heart. My presence in his mind must have hurt him unspeakably, yet he had been prepared to suffer even this for his friend's sake. He had courage - I had always known that; but I had dared to call him cold, unfeeling - now I knew the extent of the injustice I had done him. Few men, even if they were possessed of his abilities, would have had the grace, the courage, to make such a sacrifice.

Only then did I remember that, linked as we were, he would be able to sense my thoughts and emotions. Once I would have been embarrassed, now I was only grateful that he would be aware of the change in my attitude.

Deep within my mind I felt him move in warning - it was time to break the link. So total a meld, if sustained too long, could be dangerous to both of us. Responding to that warning, I returned to my office, sitting, as he had done, on the couch. As he had said, Spock's personality was so deeply submerged in mine that I must open the way for his return. Awkwardly, I copied the gesture I had so often seen him make, placing my hands on the sleeping face; I strove to make my mind a blank, then called to him with all the mental force I could summon. Gradually, I became more aware of his presence - he was responding, taking control. Then, for one brief moment, our minds touched, totally open to each other, and I saw Spock as he was, his dreams, hopes, fears, all clearly revealed to me; and I knew that he saw my mind and heart with the same clarity.

We would never speak of it; nor, I think, would either of us have wished to. I am, in my own way, almost as reticent as Spock - for many reasons, I often hesitate to display my true feelings openly - and he, of course, rarely drops that Vulcan mask. But in that moment, we both experienced a true understanding of ourselves and each other.

Not even with Jim could we share that discovery, but he would know that our relationship had changed - he was so sensitive to Spock's moods that it could not be otherwise - and it would please him.

Slowly my eyes opened, and I looked up into dark Vulcan eyes that would never again seem alien to me. There was anxiety in the gaze that held mine, and I smiled reassuringly, seeing in response the familiar raised eyebrow.

"Are you all right, Doctor?"

"Yes - just let me get my breath. All this dashing about from one body to another - it's worse than the transporter!" I complained, knowing that I must not refer, even obliquely, to what had just passed between us, and taking refuge in my usual sarcasm. As I expected, his other eyebrow rose as I went on. "Well, I suppose I'd better go and see what sort of job you've done on Jim."

He seized the opportunity I had given him, and replied in his usual cool tones. "The hands may have been mine, Doctor, but the skill -- or lack of it -- was yours."

I grunted, and levered myself to my feet; he paced soundlessly behind me as I returned to sickbay. M'Benga straightened from the bed as we entered.

"The Captain should come round soon, sir; the readings appear to be satisfactory." He left at my nod of dismissal, and Spock moved to take his place at Jim's side. How often in the past we had shared such a vigil, but never with such complete understanding as now. As the minutes passed, and Jim did not awake, I began to grow concerned.

Glancing up, I caught Spock's gaze again; the dark eyes were glowing with confidence and trust. Heartened, I turned back to Jim, just as his eyes flickered and opened. He looked at me steadily for a moment, half smiling, then his eyes turned to Spock, knowing that the Vulcan would be there. They exchanged a long, silent gaze, and for the first time I did not feel shut out by their complete acceptance of each other, for now I understood; then he sighed wearily, and relaxed against the pillows.

When I moved to run the scanner over him, he focused on my bandaged hands, and a frown of concern creased his forehead. "Bones, you're hurt! What happened?"

"Oh, it's nothing much -- just a few burns."

"Then how... I suppose M'Benga operated on me?"

"No, I did -- but I had some help."

He glanced from me to Spock, sensing, as I knew he would, that something important had happened between us.

"Spock?" he questioned.

"Yes, Captain. Dr. McCoy and I used a meld to achieve total fusion of our minds. I am...pleased...that we succeeded."

"Right!" I said firmly. "That's enough chatter for now. Jim, you've just undergone major surgery -- you need rest. And you, Spock. You've just performed a long and taxing operation -- or rather, your body has; fatigue is going to catch up with you soon. You might as well spend the night here, where I can keep an eye on you -- but no talking."

For once, he obeyed me meekly; soon they were both asleep. Leaving instructions with M'Benga, I returned to my quarters, yielding at last to my own weariness.

The last few hours had taught me much, and I felt...humbled. Spock had given me the greatest gift I could ever have imagined. It is comparatively easy to give a life for a friend if one cares enough; he had given me much more -- he had trusted me enough to show me his heart. Pride, which had been our strongest shield, our greatest curse, had finally been overcome, and I had gained a friend, a friend whose worth, I suspected, I had only just begun to learn.

In that moment, the last lingering regrets for the life I had once known vanished for ever. I had come home.

Space traveller: How long will the next spaceship be?

Vulcan spaceport controller: About two hundred feet, sir.

Chief Baillie: Did you shave this morning, Hansen?

Ensign Hansen: Yes, sir.

Chief Baillie: Well, next time stand closer to the razor.

THE CAUSE OF IT ALL... by Sheila Clark

Kirk intensely disliked the rare occasions when the Enterprise was used as a freighter. He accepted the necessity, of course - he had no choice; when an emergency arose, a Starship was the fastest vessel available - but to Spock and McCoy he grumbled about the waste and stupidity of using highly-trained personnel as merchants. But his real reason - the one he could not bring himself to confide to anyone, even those two friends who knew him so well and would understand - was that he considered it a degradation of the lovely lady who - fickle and demanding as she was - was still the only woman he would ever truly love.

On this occasion the cargo was grain; a barley-like grain that was being taken to provide seed for the imminent planting on Craque, rodents having found their way into the seed store there and destroyed almost all of it. The planting season, because of climatic conditions, was fairly short; there was no time to waste.

Kirk, having watched in deepening gloom as the first ton of the stuff was beamed aboard, retired to his cabin to recover his equanimity, leaving Spock to check the cargo aboard.

The holds filled with containers, the stowage continued in the lower corridors, leaving only room for a man to pass, a pathway occasionally widening into double width where two men could pass each other, until every available inch of space was filled with containers of grain. Spock heaved an inner, silent sigh of relief as the stream of containers that was arriving trickled to a stop. He checked that everything was properly stowed, and punched an intercom button.

"Spock to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here." The Human was aware that he sounded irritable; he tried to control his annoyance, knowing he shouldn't take it out on Spock, comforted by his failure to do so by the knowledge that Spock did understand and would not be hurt by his attitude.

"The cargo is all aboard, Captain."

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Spock. Warp six."

* * *

Scotty looked gloomily at the couple of inches of whisky left in the bottle, sighed, and poured it carefully, evenly, between the two glasses. He pushed one over to McCoy.

"And that's the last," he said sadly.

"Huh? Scotty, what happened? I've never known you to run out before."

"Bad luck, laddie; nothing but bad luck. The chap I get it from back there had an accident; he'd just recently taken on a new assistant, and the man thought the order for whisky had to be a mistake, there's so little demand for good Scotch out here, so he didn't get it in. By the time the boss found out, it was too late to get it... He was very apologetic - " Scotty shrugged. "It wasna his fault." He sighed again. "I'll just have to make do wi' brandy. But brandy - even Saurian brandy - ach, it's no' the same."

McCoy grinned. "There're other drinks on board as well as Saurian brandy," he suggested.

"Aye, and I've tried quite a few of them. They're no' the same," he repeated. "Oh, they're all right for a casual drink - but for a drink and a gossip with an old friend, there's nothing quite like Scotch whisky."

McCoy grinned again, secretly amused by his drinking partner's obstinacy. They drank companionably, in the comfortable silence only possible between good friends, making the drink last as long as possible.

At last, McCoy yawned. "I'll be glad to get to bed," he confessed. "It's been one of those days. Jim does try not to take it out on us when he's in a bad mood, but you know what he's like on these cargo-hauling jobs - edgy, irritable - and I'd to chase him up for his routine physical, which didn't help. Then I'd Spock to do after that, and you know what he's like about physicals... and it doesn't help that at heart I agree with him, that for him it's a waste of time. I just don't know what's normal for him - if two readings taken on successive weeks are different, I don't know which one's off - he doesn't follow Human physical patterns, but he doesn't strictly follow Vulcan ones either... and then I'd to recalibrate everything, of course..." He stood up. "Sorry, Scotty, I'm just taking my frustrations out on you. I'd better get to bed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Scotty's voice followed him out the door.

Scotty studied the empty bottle in unrelieved gloom for a little longer, then got up. He crossed to his bed, then hesitated. He wasn't really sleepy yet. He might as well check the night watch. Good for discipline, too - the odd, unexpected visit from the Chief Engineer did help keep all his staff, even the best of them, on their toes.

He walked out into the corridor, turning towards the elevator as he did so, and promptly bumped into one of the grain containers. Its edge was surprisingly sharp; it hurt. He muttered something inaudible but uncomplimentary about freighters incapable of travelling faster than Warp two, resulting in Starships being cluttered up with cargo...

He took two more strides - and stopped. He looked at the continuous line of containers marching in file along the corridor - and a half smile dawned as the beginnings of an idea began to take shape. He examined a container carefully, glancing up and down the corridor to make sure no-one was coming, then unerringly unfastened the lid and removed it.

The grain didn't quite fill the container - the top inch or so was empty. The smile broadened. He put the lid back on again, checked that it was secure, and headed on towards Engineering.

* * *

The grain was duly off-loaded and the Enterprise headed back towards Starbase 11. Everyone aboard seemed more cheerful, from the Captain down; even the Enterprise herself seemed almost to prance as she sped through space - even though she was now travelling at Warp one instead of Warp six.

They were twenty-four hours at Starbase 11, then, with new orders, they were on their way again - on another of Kirk's pet hates, a diplomatic mission. At least Ambassador Fox was an old acquaintance who had learned quite a lot from a previous trip on the Enterprise; Kirk no longer had to worry about him or his reactions towards the crew. In fact, Fox made quite a congenial addition to the group that often formed in the rec. room, consisting of Kirk himself, Spock, McCoy, and often Scotty, Sulu or Uhura as well, when, by common consent, the one subject that was avoided was ship's business.

They reached the planet where Fox's mission was to try to reconcile the completely divergent views of two warring groups, both trying to grasp power. On the surface, all was at least relatively peaceful; and after consultation with Fox, Kirk decided to grant the crew shore leave while they waited for the Ambassador to complete his mission. Apart from anything else, the presence of Federation uniforms should remind the two warring parties that the Federation, while quite willing to accept whatever settlement the disputing factors reached, did insist that it should be a peaceful solution, not one gained by force of arms.

The first third of the crew beamed down for forty-eight hours leave. There was no trouble, not that Kirk had really expected any. Although one or two of the men did have a tendency to drink too much on leave, the most intoxicating liquor here was only about one percent proof. It wasn't impossible

to get drunk - if a man were determined enough - but it was unlikely that any would. The second group beamed down.

Six hours later, Kirk got a frantic call from Fox. Some of the men - a group of five - had managed to get roaring drunk and were threatening to undo a great deal of his work.

It took twelve security guards to overpower them - and only then by using phasers to stun them.

McCoy checked them as a matter of course - and promptly found himself in the middle of a medical emergency, as all needed treatment for acute alcoholic poisoning. It was three days before he was sure that all would recover.

Kirk made inquiries immediately. They had obviously found somewhere that sold real rot-gut; he intended to put the place off limits. He would have cancelled all leave, except that no-one else had found the place - not one of the first group had, nor any other of the second; clearly it wasn't easy to find. But he warned the entire crew that he would throw the book at anyone else who got fighting drunk, although he promised to overlook it if anyone would come forward who would admit to finding the place - where-ever it was. No-one could help him. The five had been together the whole time, no-one else with them. They had gone into one bar where some of their crewmates were gathered; had one drink - over a dozen of their crewmates testified to that - and promptly went berserk. The drink was the innocuous local brew that passed itself off as being alcoholic.

"The logical conclusion is that they drank something else before they entered the bar," Spock commented.

"They weren't seen in any other bar," Kirk objected.

"Therefore they found someplace that no-one else did."

"That's what I've been trying to find out, dammit!" Kirk snapped.

"If no-one else found it, no-one could tell you where it was," Spock pointed out in the reasonable way that sometimes became frustratingly irritable.

"Come off it, Spock," McCoy protested, temporarily raising his head from the results he was trying to process in his attempts to discover just what had been in the stuff that had poisoned the men. "You don't really believe that out of two-thirds of the crew, only five found the den that sold... whatever it was?"

"Bones is right, Spock," Kirk said. "This is a good crew, the best, but even so there are several that I'd guarantee to find the lowest drinking den possible when they're on leave. Only they didn't. No-one else got drunk, let alone fighting drunk. I want to know how they did it!"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to wait till they come round, and then ask them," McCoy said.

* * *

As the men regained their senses - all with incapacitating hangovers that no pills seemed able to alleviate - McCoy tried gently questioning them.

"Oh, my head... never again..."

"What were you drinking? It must have been some hooch."

"... odd. I don't remember."

The reply was consistent. The men all recovered with an amnesia that covered not only the entire six hours of their leave, but several hours before it as well...

* * *

McCoy joined Scotty that night for a quiet drink from the Engineer's store, replenished at Starbase 11 - the first night he had been able to do so since the emergency. It immediately struck him that Scotty was looking rather depressed.

"What's wrong, Scotty?"

"Oh - nothing, really... Are those lads all right - the ones you've been seeing to?"

"Yes, they'll be O.K. now. They've lost seven or eight hours - can't remember a thing that happened, and the computer concurs; they are telling the truth, not just covering up. They honestly can't remember what they were drinking - or where."

Scotty nodded. He looked subtly more cheerful - but still rather unhappy.

"Any special reason for asking?" McCoy went on.

"Oh - no."

It was too forced. "Come on, Scotty. Tell me."

Scotty hesitated.

"I get it!" McCoy exclaimed. "You know where they got the hooch?"

"Aye."

There was a short silence.

"Well, come on, don't leave me in suspense... Oh, I see. You don't want Jim to know? Scotty, you know I don't betray confidences. What he doesn't know won't hurt him - even if it does leave him with an unsolved mystery to worry about. Give him - and Spock - something to think about."

Reluctantly, Scotty began, "... Mind when we were carrying that cargo of grain?"

"Yes."

"And I ran out of whisky? Well, it struck me that I might try making my own. There was all that grain..."

"You mean you took some of it?"

"Aye. No much! A handful each from some of the containers. Just barely enough to try it out. I thought, if it worked, I could easily get some proper barley and keep on making it. We couldna drink it right away, of course, it'd need some time to mature... Anyway, it was easy enough rigging up a still - a few extra lengths of piping in the engine room, even of copper, wouldna mean anything to anyone... and there are areas we're no meant to go in while the ship's under way, but you can get away with it if you know what you're doing, and that gave me somewhere to germinate the grain where no-one would notice the smell. I did most of the work at night. I'd to watch none of the juniors saw me, right enough, but it was easy to fool them... I didna get much spirit, just about half a gallon..."

"And?" McCoy prompted, as the silence lengthened and it began to look as if Scotty wasn't going to say any more.

"Maybe I should have kept the jar where I germinated the grain, but I didna really fancy going in again so soon, and I didna want to have it in my room because I'd no place really to keep it out of sight, so I put it in one of the unused storerooms in the lower levels, well tucked away. But they must have found it, for the jar's gone, where-ever they drank it. And it was pure alcohol, raw as the devil. Hadn't had a chance to mature. Maybe that particular grain doesn't make good liquor; maybe the radiation when it was germinating affected it; or maybe it just wouldna mix with anything, even the soda-pop they call liquor down there. But whatever it was, it was my fault."

I should have made certain it was hidden where no-one could possibly find it. At least I've learned a lesson - I'll no' try again, in case I really do manage to poison someone else."

McCoy chuckled. "No, you'd better not try that again. But why don't we see if we could use sickbay facilities. The smell of some of my stuff would disguise the smell of the spirit, and - "

"We'd have to find somewhere else to germinate the grain," Scotty reminded him. "You canna have that lying around on the sickbay floor."

"No, but I could lock one of the smaller wards..."

Scotty began to look quite enthusiastic. "If you think we would get away with it... We'll have to wait till we can get the proper barley, of course - I'm no' trying it again with anything else - but the first chance we get..."

"And this time, we'll make sure that no-one can find it before we're ready to drink it."

Scotty raised his glass. "I'm looking forward to it already."

The very end of the zine does seem an unusual place to put an editorial - but in fact, I hadn't originally intended to include one. Then I realised that a couple of points needed to be explained.

First of all, all of the stories in this are by the three of us - Valerie, Janet and Sheila - and were first printed by STAG. Some of the items were reprinted in STAG's reprint zine, Repeat Missions, others are being reprinted for the first time in Enterprise Mission Review. The second issue will also be composed of stories by the three of us. Subsequent issues, however, will be made up of the most popular stories from Enterprise - Log Entries and Enterprise - Personal Log.

So why, you might ask yourselves, are there poems by someone called T.G.Z.C.? The answer is quite simple - in the early days of Log Entries, we sometimes ran short of material, especially short fillers, and I supplied these, using T.G.Z.C. as a pen name. I've chosen to retain the pen name in these reprints.

We aren't in these first two issues of Enterprise Mission Review using all of the stories written by Valerie and Sheila that were first printed in Log Entries - Valerie's Baillie stories, for example, are reprinted in Baillie Collected. And there are one or two that I would not like to reprint without a fresh edit; on the other hand, it doesn't seem quite fair to do such an edit on a reprint. So I'm doing the next best thing, and leaving them out. As a writer gains experience, flaws in the early writings do show, and some of the stories I printed of my own would have benefitted ~~from being~~ edited by someone else. After Valerie joined our editorial group, the situation improved, for she edited my stories thereafter, just as I edited hers.

We enjoyed writing these stories; we hope you enjoy reading them.

January 1982